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## **Khwaja Sira: Culture, Identity Politics, and "Transgender" Activism in Pakistan**

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## Abstract

In 2009, the Pakistani Supreme Court began granting rights to gender ambiguous people who are locally known as *khwaja siras*. The Court organized this population into taxonomic groups and ordered the government to ‘mainstream’ them. These actions were based on certain cultural assumptions and occurred amid uncertainties about who *khwaja siras* really were. Meanwhile, *khwaja siras* began to mobilize in an effort to control their public image. Based on fourteen months of ethnographic fieldwork on the identity politics of *khwaja siras* in Karachi, this dissertation seeks to understand the ways in which gender ambiguous people constructed, negotiated and represented themselves both within their social networks and in the wider society, as well as the factors underpinning their public portrayals. I conceive *khwaja sira* politics as a ‘game’, that is, as the art of manipulation and concealment. I argue that the games of secrecy and deception in which this minority population engaged were responses to the stigma they experienced in everyday life.

*Khwaja sira* relationships with the general public were strategic game-like interactions that were meant to conceal knowledge, misrepresent gender variant people, and confuse opponents. They allowed *khwaja siras* to maintain ambiguity about their corporeality, conceal their sexualized lifestyle, and seek inclusion into mainstream society. These everyday forms of agency and deceit emerged on a larger scale and in far more sophisticated ways in the realm of activism. However, social stigma was so pervasive that it permeated into the *khwaja sira* cultural system, impacting the self-esteem of its members and triggering identity wars between them. These fissures were replicated within activist spaces where they often stifled efforts to empower *khwaja siras*. The games of secrecy and deception that gender variant people played both facilitated and undermined their movement. These empowering and conscious acts of self-

preservation enhanced their security within an oppressive social environment. However, khwaja sira politics did not promote understanding of gender and sexual difference. These provisional solutions perpetuated ambiguity about khwaja siras, temporarily grazing the surface of their struggles without promoting long-term stigma reduction.

**Khwaja Sira: Culture, Identity Politics, and  
“Transgender” Activism in Pakistan**

by

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B.A., Hanover College, 2005  
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Dissertation

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Anthropology

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### **Note On Transliteration**

I have used an Urdu transliteration system for all non-English words in the text. This system has also been applied to all non-Urdu words that are either considered to be a part of the Urdu language (e.g., Arabic) or were spoken in tandem with Urdu. I have italicized these words only the first time they appear in the text. For the ease of reading, the names of people, places and organizations are presented using their common English spellings.

**PART ONE:**  
**Setting the Scene**

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Nadia took out another Capstan, lit it with a matchstick, and took a deep puff. Seconds later she exhaled thick cigarette smoke. “They lie so much!” she said with a hint of disdain. Nadia sat before me in a low-neck women’s *shalvār qamīz*, revealing a little day-old chest stubble. “Why?” I asked as I wiped the sweat trickling down my forehead with a frayed tissue paper. “They don’t open up to strangers,” she said between puffs. I took a sip of bottled water to cool down from the mid-afternoon heat. I was at Nadia’s house near Karachi Cantt Station, sitting on her soiled floor mattress, my back against the uncemented brick wall. I had recently hired Nadia as my research assistant, and she was alerting me to the possible situations that might occur during my interactions with *khwaja siras*, who I momentarily describe as gender ambiguous people, that is, as a category of non-normative individuals whose gendered desires and practices diverged from those of their assigned male sex. Nadia, herself a *khwaja sira*, twisted and draped her long ponytail across her left shoulder and said, “They won’t tell you the real things about their life... They’ll get really confused and begin wondering who you are and what you want.”

This was not the first or the last time I heard something of this sort. Informants frequently talked about *khwaja siras* who routinely obscured “the real things.” Indeed, many engaged in the practice of concealment during interactions with me. What I did not realize that afternoon at Nadia’s house was that such exchanges between *khwaja siras* and outsiders like myself would become one of the central foci of my study. But what did these gender ambiguous people conceal from mainstream society and why? It was hard to get a straightforward response to this question from interlocutors, and arriving at a conclusion became a journey in itself. This question stayed with me as I ventured out to discover truths about *khwaja siras*.

This dissertation reflects my journey of uncovering answers to these questions. Specifically, it is about khwaja sira identity politics, of which the practice described by Nadia is a part. By focusing on various aspects of the culture and activism of khwaja siras, I reconceive their politics as a “game,” that is, as the art of obfuscation and deception that required dexterity and often entailed a personal sense of challenge. Here, game must not be presumed to be a level playing field, but, as is often the case, be viewed as manipulative performances in which some participants were altogether oblivious to being pawns in someone else’s game. These games or forms of “play” were learned behaviors with a ritualistic quality since they were largely framed, intentional and rehearsed (Basso 1979, 4), but also potentially experimental. Against this understanding of the term, I develop and apply the notion of “game” to various aspects of the lives of gender ambiguous people, particularly to the inner workings of khwaja sira social and activist networks as well as the exchanges between ordinary and activist khwaja siras and the outside world. I argue that the games they played were responses to oppressive social norms and to the stigma they experienced in everyday life. They were also a means of accessing rights, justice and equal citizenship.

Khwaja sira relationships with mainstream society were strategic game-like interactions that were meant to conceal knowledge, deceive opponents, and perpetuate ambiguity about the corporeality and sexuality of gender ambiguous people. These tactics allowed khwaja siras to misrepresent themselves, reinforce beneficial stereotypes, shatter damaging ones, seek inclusion into the mainstream, and potentially expand its boundaries. Far from being radical, the self and group representations of khwaja siras mostly complied with and only occasionally attempted to expand cultural norms instead of problematizing them. Hence, khwaja sira identity politics were not liberationist or overtly transformational in nature, but a combination of assimilationist

technologies that worked within the existing sociopolitical structure, and expansionist approaches that cautiously aimed to extend normative boundaries. I contend that khwaja sira politics of representation were rational, conscious and generative games of self-preservation.

Further, the public portrayals of khwaja siras deviated from their personal understandings of individual and group identities. This dissonance between projected and felt subjectivity often incited conflict within khwaja sira communities. In addition to impacting their self-esteem, social stigma permeated into the khwaja sira cultural system where it triggered identity wars between them. Structural violence was so pervasive that it impelled them to discriminate against one another on the basis of mainstream cultural and religious beliefs pertaining to anatomy, sexual identity and practice, class and ethnicity. Cultural norms and khwaja sira identity politics were inextricably linked since the former had a direct influence on both internally experienced and externally projected identities. Importantly, the fissures within their social networks were replicated in the domain of khwaja sira activism where they stifled efforts to empower gender ambiguous people.

I suggest that khwaja sira identity politics both undermined and facilitated the khwaja sira movement. They assisted gender variant Pakistanis in short-term interactions with opponents, allowing them to settle disputes, win arguments, deflect negative attention, and positively represent themselves. These games helped to enhance their security within an oppressive sociocultural environment. However, they did not promote understanding and acceptance of gender and sexual variance. Instead, these provisional, band-aid solutions concealed as much as they revealed, confused the general public, and left them in a state of doubt about who khwaja siras really were while impeding the state's efforts to rehabilitate them. At best, this kind of politics temporarily grazed the surface of the problems faced by khwaja siras without resulting in

long-term stigma reduction. Even as they served transient functions, khwaja sira “identity politics constitute[d] narrow legal/political activism that fail[ed] to address cultural sources of oppression” (Bernstein 2005, 57). In what follows, I lay out my theoretical framework for the study of khwaja siras. The following sections focus on terminological and methodological issues, the significance of this project, and an overview of chapters.

### **Theorizing Khwaja Sira Politics**

The themes central to this dissertation are secrecy, deception, and ambiguity, as well as issues of identity, stigma and marginalization. I illustrate the relationality between these topics and khwaja sira politics by weaving together perspectives on the production and management of dominant discourse, theories of identity presentation and management among stigmatized people, and social movement theories on identity. This theoretical armamentarium enables an investigation of khwaja sira practices within two overlapping cultural systems: the khwaja sira universe and mainstream society.

These perspectives demonstrate how dominant beliefs influenced khwaja sira personhood and lived experience, shaped the way they saw and treated one another, impacted how they thought they were perceived by the wider society, and affected their interactions with the public. Khwaja sira identity politics revolved around three central questions: Who am I/Who are we? How do others see me/us? How do I/we want others to see me/us? Accordingly, the games of deception that khwaja siras played both informed and were informed by personal experience and public discourse.

Everyday resistance to norms has been an important topic of anthropological focus, particularly in the study of gender in South Asia and the Middle East (Abu-Lughod 1990;

Ahearn 2001; Lamb 2000; Mahmood 2001; Raheja and Gold 1994). However gestures of defiance are but one kind of reaction to marginalization. In agreement with Christine Pelzer White, I find just as crucial explorations of “everyday forms of collaboration” with the norm (1986, 56), and what Susan Seizer refers to as everyday “expansions” of the norm (2000, 218). Although I pay attention to all three types of practices, gestures of compliance were most prevalent in the interactions between khwaja siras and the general public, particularly since they were vital to their survival in Pakistan’s oppressive heteronormative environment. I, therefore, draw on perspectives that enable a close examination of how khwaja siras claimed inclusion in mainstream society.

#### The Production and Management of Dominant Culture

National culture and the public sphere are aspects of the dominant society that elucidate the relationship between khwaja sira identity politics and social norms. Stuart Hall writes that national culture is a discourse, a construction that influences and organizes people’s behavior and self-conceptions (1997, 612-3), but despite the appearance of unity, it does not erase differences between the citizenry, which is fraught with internal contradictions and divisions (1997, 618). How do nations view and treat those who threaten to disrupt the narrative of the nation, and what remedial action is taken by those who do not fit neatly into this meta-narrative? I demonstrate that khwaja siras aimed to strategically insert themselves into Pakistani national culture by identifying points of intersection linking them to the grand narrative of the nation-state without posing an ideological threat to it.

Despite their best efforts, however, the Pakistani state increased its regulation of khwaja siras. Foucault argued that the modern discourse on sexuality gradually emerged in mainstream



Western societies through the technologies of power and bodily discipline that involved such controls as confession, medical intervention, state regimentation, and public moral policing (1977; 1979). This surveillance of sexuality intensified in the twentieth century, when secrecy became “a constant threat to the perceived moral legitimacy of the State” (Herdt 2003, 59).

Khwaja siras, a segment of the Pakistani population that had been categorically ignored by the state, came under scrutiny for the first time since independence as a result of the rights granted to them in 2009. The downside of legal recognition is increased regimentation. While the state aimed to understand, define, and organize khwaja siras in line with religious and cultural norms, gender ambiguous Pakistanis engaged in the politics and praxis of strategic assimilation.

Further, the public sphere in Pakistan, as a reflection of dominant thought, is suggestive of mainstream understandings of khwaja siras. The Pakistani public is a discursive imaginary (re)produced through media, rhetoric, political organizing, religion, the circulation of written and oral texts, performances, history and so on. This public is ephemeral rather than spatial, that is, it emerges in and through discursive and transient moments. For instance, it surfaced during the encounters of khwaja siras with their neighbors and with media outlets. Importantly, the Pakistani public is diverse, comprised of both polarized and overlapping points of view. That khwaja siras concomitantly experienced acceptance, social distancing, outright rejection and violence is evidence of the uneasy coexistence of multiple publics in Pakistan. By drawing upon the above understanding of the Pakistani public, and then extrapolating it through a Foucauldian discourse analysis, I examine what “khwaja sira” meant to the sociopolitical imaginary and how these meanings informed the game-like maneuvers of gender ambiguous people.

### Stigma, Identity and Deception

Secrecy has historically been a necessary protective device for certain groups of people in their attempts to avoid oppression (Simmel 1960, Foucault 1980), particularly to those who are stigmatized, such as sexual minorities (Herdt 1997). In his essay, “The Secret and the Secret Society,” (1950) Georg Simmel offers that secrecy is indicative of a divided society, one that is fraught with social conflict and the subjugation of those who maintain secrecy. However, since secrets carry the threat of discovery, khwaja siras maintained them through a variety of tactical maneuvers. Over time, khwaja siras had developed this art of secrecy through which they concealed information and escaped discrimination.

Stigma theories shed light on the games that khwaja siras had devised to cope with their marginal status. In his discussion on the identity management of stigmatized persons, Erving Goffman states that stigma arises from the perception of “an undesired differentness” from the norm (1963, 5). Stigmatized people absorb normative values from society, and are acutely aware of what others see as their inadequacies (1963, 7). Goffman found in such people the desire to assimilate through such methods as passing, “covering,” and the concealment of stigma symbols (1963, 44, 92). The strategic management of information through the use of such techniques can be likened to a game. In *Strategic Interaction* (1969), Goffman suggests that many face-to-face interactions involving the control and management of information have a “gamelike” (10) quality. In these exchanges, participants are engaged in strategic maneuvers, such as “varying degrees of disclosure” (7), “verbal reticence” (13), and “misrepresentation” (14). Through these strategies, stigmatized persons manage information about their shortcomings and fashion virtual identities that are distinct from their actual personhood (1963, 41). As stigmatized persons, khwaja siras too upheld social norms and were cognizant of their divergence from them. Likewise, they engaged in game-like identity presentation and management techniques to control

information and manage perception, particularly in exchanges with relatives, neighbors, media outlets, government officials, NGO workers, and other members of mainstream society. These techniques enabled them to maintain multiple, fluid, situated and imbricated identities.

In order to avoid theorizing stigma in “overly individualistic, psychological ways ” (Van Hollen 2013, 97), Parker and Aggleton (2003) suggest reading Goffman’s insights alongside Foucault’s theories on power and Bourdieu’s concern with social reproduction. Foucault highlights how power and social control are increasingly exercised not through physical force but through “the production of conforming subjects and docile bodies” (17). Likewise, Bourdieu indicates that hierarchies are reproduced within social systems, often without much conscious recognition or resistance from dominated subjects (18). Joining together the insights of Goffman, Foucault and Bourdieu, “it becomes possible to understand stigma and stigmatization not merely as isolated phenomenon, or expressions of individual attitudes or of cultural values, but as central to the constitution of the social order” (17).

Deception was a key identity presentation and management strategy used by khwaja siras. According to Lieberman, “[d]eception appears to serve two primary functions...it enables people to avoid the unpleasant or unacceptable personal situations that would arise if one always told the truth, but more importantly it serves as a useful and necessary tool to advance one's self-interest” (1977, 79). Further, according to Lieberman, Machiavelli’s analysis of political collective action emphasized the utility for rulers in outwardly appearing to possess positive character traits (e.g., merciful, faithful, humane, religious) (Lieberman 1977, 66). Unlike Machiavelli’s ruler-centered approach, I recast the use of duplicity by those in power to those who are powerless. Khwaja siras maintained a deceptive public appearance of possessing noble

qualities not only for personal benefit but also to prevent the citizenry from thinking that the rights granted to them threatened the moral balance of the country.

Simmel argues that the act of deceiving not only depends upon the deceived's lack of information, but it is also meant to further restrict his/her knowledge (Lieberman 1977, 67). Similarly, the relationships of khwaja siras with ordinary people relied on the latter's limited and distorted understanding of the former. Khwaja siras' ability to deceive outsiders was grounded in the partial and often erroneous knowledge—comprised primarily of myths and stereotypes— that the general public had of them. However, unlike Simmel, I do not make value judgments concerning the use of deception. This enables an examination of both the drawbacks and the benefits of deception in the everyday and activist lives of khwaja siras.

Goffman too discussed the deployment of deceptive behavior in social interactions. In *Stigma* (1963), he examined how persons with defects managed information about their failings, and in *Asylums* (1961) he noted the strategies mentally disturbed individuals employed to “pass off” or “get by” (Lieberman 1977, 70). “Those who choose to pass...[tend] to do so under a complex system of pressures, often to escape...unjust restraints on personal freedom, or to access greater levels of opportunity or power...” (Harrison 2013, 1). Such deceptive acts enabled gender variant Pakistanis to misrepresent themselves as respectable and moral. However, in my analysis, I reject Goffman's view that social actors lack a situational understanding of their deceptive performances, which is an underestimation of actor self-awareness. I suggest that khwaja sira performances of deception were learned behaviors (a point that Goffman marginally alludes to [1959]), that is, they were rehearsed and tested cultural scripts of deception, acquired by observing the interactions of senior khwaja siras and their opponents.

Importantly, khwaja sira games of deception did not merely block knowledge but distorted it. In interactions with outsiders, khwaja siras employed such techniques as polysemy, prevarication, vagueness, and inconsistency to the effect that their listeners were left in a state of confusion and uncertainty about the precise meaning of their speech. The ambiguous speech of khwaja siras warped mainstream understandings of the contemporary forms of diverse gender experiences in Pakistan. Such speech perpetuated obscurity about khwaja sira anatomy and sexuality, while situating gender ambiguous people within the domain of the acceptable.

Mimesis is yet another identity presentation technique used by khwaja siras as a means of integrating into the national framework. Here, “mimesis does not mean the duplication of reality; mimesis is...construction, creation” (Adams 1996, 18). Diana Taylor states that “[i]ndividual and state formation take place, in part, in the visual sphere through a complicated play of looks: looking, being looked at, identification, recognition, mimicry” (1997, 30). Similarly, in detailing a social history of India, Partha Chatterjee notes that Indian women’s internalization of the image of the ideal Indian woman played an important role in building a new Indian nation (1993, 130-1). By assuming the model of “virtuous domesticity,” middle class Indian women managed to preserve respectability while participating in the public sphere. This human ability to internalize and mimic culturally celebrated frames also enabled gender ambiguous people to produce the archetype of the socially respectable, responsible and acceptable khwaja sira. This ideal image was meant to counter and suppress the stereotype of immorality, sexuality, and inauthenticity attached to gender nonconforming persons. Through bodily discipline and self-policing in ordinary and activist contexts, gender ambiguous people aimed to create a moral social imaginary regarding khwaja siras. This is not to say that they aimed for a complete erasure of sexuality since being perceived as objects of desire was essential to their livelihood as dancers

and sex workers. However, they did not wish to be viewed in sexual terms by “decent” members of society, a concern with personal respectability that was shared by the hijras in Reddy’s study (2005). Accordingly, khwaja siras managed the split between their public and private lives, that is, between their virtual and actual identities.

The concept of the Lacanian gaze complicates an easy reading of the process of mimicry. Lacan suggests that we are all objects of the gaze of the other, where the act of gazing consists of the “image” or object, and the “screen” or the viewer’s veneer of interpretation (1988, 91). Marianne Hirsch (1997) furthers Lacan’s ideas in stating that the gaze is historically situated and culturally mediated. Moreover, additional veneers of cultural difference, such as ethnicity, class, age, gender, sexuality, and so on also color our interpretation of images. The Lacanian gaze suggests that khwaja sira compliance with norms, forged through looking and mimicking, not only produced images of the good citizen, but also created possibilities for the expansion of norms. Khwaja siras were not a monolithic group and the sociocultural differences among them produced differences in the interpretation of what it meant to be a good khwaja sira.

Cryptography was another technique of information control used by khwaja siras. Cryptography refers to the implementation of techniques of secure or secret communication (Singh 2000, xiv-xv) in the presence of third parties, especially one’s adversaries. For instance, khwaja siras used their secret code, Farsi<sup>1</sup>, in the company of other gender ambiguous people, particularly in the presence of outsiders. Not only was Farsi a marker of khwaja sira identity and insider status, but it also blocked communication with ordinary people. This tool was an important ingredient of the khwaja sira repertoire of secrecy games.

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<sup>1</sup> The Farsi spoken by khwaja siras was not the Persian language but a secret vocabulary developed within hijra and zennana communities. Farsi words were incorporated into other local languages and dialects in everyday speech.

<sup>2</sup> I intentionally say “khwaja sira communities” in plural form rather than “the khwaja sira

Thus far, I have focused on theoretical perspectives that illustrate how khwaja siras produced virtual identities through interactions with the general public. I now turn to their actual identities, which subsisted within their social world. These identities both converged with and diverged from virtual ones. Simmel saw secret formations as covert establishments within the manifest world (1950, 330), wherein secrets produce a feeling of unity among group members (Ritzer and Goodman 2003). Khwaja sira networks were not secret societies since they were visibly present in the Pakistani public landscape. However, secrecy was an important aspect of their culture, one that promoted internal cohesion and the security of its members. I, therefore, view khwaja sira networks as visible subcultures that were relegated to the margins of dominant society, but were nonetheless chock full of clandestine practices. However, I complicate an easy reading of cohesion within secret formations to argue that this demi-world was not a unified social structure but an unstable one made up of multiple, overlapping and contradictory subject positions and identities. These internal differences produced conflict within and between khwaja sira communities and organizations.

Moreover, stigma impacted the social relationships among gender ambiguous people. Goffman wrote that the beliefs of mainstream society instruct the stigmatized person on how to feel about and treat those who diverge from the norm (1963, 111). Consequently, the stigmatized might be repelled at the sight of their own kind displaying their failings (1963, 108). Goffman also suggested that “it is often the stigmatized person who internalizes the stigma with the most vigor, leading to feelings of shame, self-hate and self-derogation” (Van Hollen 2010, 644). As stigmatized people, khwaja siras regularly discriminated against various gender and sexual minority groups on the basis of the mainstream beliefs they endorsed. Their internal identity

politics reveal the impact of low self-esteem and internalized stigma on the everyday and activist lives of khwaja siras.

### Activism and Identity Politics

Social movement perspectives deepen understandings of the processes of identity presentation within the realm of activism. Akin to Goffman's insights about actual and virtual identities, social movement scholars Bernstein (2005) and Tilly (2002) suggest making a distinction between externally deployed identities that are strategically appropriated (i.e., detached identities), and internally experienced ones that are invoked in everyday practice (i.e., embedded identities). Bernstein cautions researchers to not take at face value the public claims about identity made by social movements since they may not be experienced in everyday life (2005, 67). The concept of identity deployment explains the strategic processes through which activists project certain identities to achieve their objectives (Bernstein 1997). This "requires the projection of 'sameness' to outsiders...[and the identities deployed] must stem from a coherent social location understandable to those who are the audience for them..." (Stephen 2001, 54). Similarly, khwaja sira activists projected a fairly homogenized khwaja sira identity to mainstream society, one that presented gender ambiguous Pakistanis as a unified and culturally acceptable populace.

Even though identities are historically and culturally constructed, social movements tend to solidify and essentialize them. Often these essentialisms are strategic, particularly when they are collectively deployed as a political scheme (Bernstein 2005, 59). Essentialist identities tend to be primordial, especially when they employ "histories which go back well before the birth of those being identified" (Unnithan and Thin 1989, 22). Khwaja sira activists deployed strategic



essentialisms that reified, hardened, narrowed down and often misrepresented what it meant to be a khwaja sira. In addition, they drew upon histories that helped them establish legitimacy and authenticity. Khwaja sira politics suggest that culturally grounded strategic essentialisms have greater potential for acceptance in mainstream Pakistani society compared to foreign identity constructs. Instead of juxtaposing essentialisms with constructions, I suggest that the former were also socially constructed and tactically appropriated by khwaja siras.

Moreover, the external misrepresentations of khwaja sira activists were transnormative. In writing about the LGBT movement in the United States, Lisa Duggan describes homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (2002, 179). For instance, the drive to legalize same-sex marriage is a strategy aimed at normalizing queer people through monogamy, one that overrides other forms of intimate relationships. Equally, the identity politics of khwaja siras was “queer” normative in that it was either in compliance with or it presented acceptable versions of social norms that did not seek to complicate heteronormativity.

Having discussed social movement perspectives on external identities, I now turn to the internal politics of activist domains. “Identity work” is a term coined by Snow and Anderson to refer to “the range of activities individuals engage in to create...and sustain...identities that are congruent with...the self concept” (1987, 1348). Identity work describes how members of a movement view themselves as a collective whole (2000, 42). “Constructing and maintaining identity...requires a great deal of work” (Einwoher, Reger, and Myers 2008, 2), such as the creation and maintenance of meanings that sustain movements (Glass 2009, 526). The identity work carried out by khwaja sira activists aimed to create strands of commonality among various

categories of khwaja siras. However, because this type of work was lacking, it led to an internal crisis of representation within activist domains.

This crisis was exacerbated by the fact that externally deployed or detached identities were often devoid of the ground realities of ordinary khwaja siras. The essentialized, homogenous, and normalized identities externally projected by khwaja sira activists did not always harmonize with the lived subjectivities of khwaja siras. In fact, detached identities produced dissonance within activist organizations when they excluded certain gender ambiguous constituents. Norget offers that “[o]ften... ‘outside’ perspectives... exert a significant influence on the internal dynamics of a movement and the course of its development” (2010, 120). Similarly, dominant beliefs shaped both the internal and the external politics of the khwaja sira movement. Ironically, the identities that were externally deployed to reduce the effects of stigma often became a source of internal conflict within khwaja sira organizations.

### **Terminological Concerns**

There are many ways to define *khwaja sira*, but no one definition is complete in and of itself partly due to the absence of fitting vocabulary that literally translates the term from Urdu to English. Moreover, khwaja sira is historically and culturally situated within the South Asian context, and has distinct trajectories of use in contemporary Pakistan. One task in this dissertation is to unpack what khwaja sira has meant at various points in time to different groups of people. From a Euro-American point of view, they may appear to be male-to-female transgender individuals, but such an imperialist understanding does not do justice to the contemporary khwaja sira experience in Pakistan because it conceals the following: that being a khwaja sira entails being a part of a vast social network that is guided by its own culture and

traditions; the fact that many types of sexual minorities are included in the khwaja sira identity category; and that the term khwaja sira is a product of the confluence of history, activism, legal change, and media intervention.

Khwaja siras are commonly known as *hijras* in many parts of South Asia. In Pakistan, the term regained currency around the mid-2000s owing partly to the efforts of activists who appropriated it as a politically correct identity label to replace “hijra,” which they believed carried negative connotations among the general public. However, hijra was still very much in use within khwaja sira communities<sup>2</sup> in Karachi along with a spate of other terms.

Khwaja sira is a highly contested term, and yet I have used it as the primary identity label to describe those who are the focus of this investigation. There are several reasons why I employ it in my writing. First, khwaja sira was the term of choice that gender ambiguous people wanted outsiders to use while addressing them. Second, informants viewed khwaja sira as an umbrella category under which other genderqueer groups were subsumed. Third, understanding the use of the term “khwaja sira” is important to a study centered on activism and on the relationship between gender ambiguous people and the wider society. Alternatively, “hijra” may have figured prominently in my writing had I limited my focus to the culture and everyday life of ordinary khwaja siras. Fourth, it would be inappropriate for an anthropological study focused on khwaja siras to employ politically incorrect identity labels for those being studied. My use of khwaja sira is not meant to undermine the importance of other identity labels. In fact, one of the goals of this study is to illustrate the interrelationship between them.

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<sup>2</sup> I intentionally say “khwaja sira communities” in plural form rather than “the khwaja sira community” in singular in order to highlight the fact that this cultural system was a discursive social network consisting of distinct yet intersecting sets of lineages, classes, households, extended families and identity circles. Rather than being place-bound, this network was spread across an expansive geography characterized by social and ideological linkages and ruptures.

Among English language terms, I use “transgender” in the broadest sense to refer to those whose gender identity differed from their assigned sex, such as a person who is born physically male but does not identify as a man<sup>3</sup>. In the years leading up to my research, transgender and its abbreviated forms, “TG” and “trans,” had gained currency among some groups of khwaja siras, including activists and employees and patrons of sexual health NGOs. However, I limit my use of transgender to individuals who identified as such, especially those who resisted khwaja sira and other local terms as identity labels. The English terms that I use most frequently and interchangeably with khwaja sira, though still with caution, are “gender ambiguous” and “gender variant” individuals, not only to add terminological variety to my text but also because I find them to be less laden with Euro-American connotations. However, none of these terms were used by khwaja siras as self-identifiers. I acknowledge that in employing English words to reference the subjects of my study, I risk making an imperialist move since these terms may not precisely index the embodied subjectivities of local gender/sexual minorities. Paradoxically, I use “transgender” in the title of this dissertation because I want this study to be easily accessible to those seeking information on the global diversity of nonnormative gender and sexuality. Employing an instituted term, such as transgender, serves to make this study identifiable to a broader audience even as it aims to critique it.

Another term that appears in this text is “queer,” which I do not employ as an identity label but as an adjective to describe those whose gendered and sexual desires and practices did not conform to heteronormativity. With the exception of certain elite LGBT activists, khwaja siras and most other gender/sexual minorities did not use this word as a self-descriptor. In

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<sup>3</sup> Taking a lead from Valentine (2007), I avoid using the term “transgendered” since it may carry negative connotations among some audiences. Instead, I use “transgender” both as a noun and an adjective (25).

opposition to khwaja sira and gender ambiguous people, I alternate between “ordinary people” (*‘ām log*), a term used by informants, and “non-khwaja siras” to refer to those who whose gendered desires and practice matched the norms of their birth sex and/or those who did not belong to khwaja sira communities.

## **Methods and Challenges**

### The Field

When the time came to select a field site in Pakistan, Karachi was the obvious choice for both practical and research purposes. I wanted to focus my research in an urban center since they tend to be hotbeds for activism. Moreover, since I was born and raised in Karachi, I had a certain familiarity with the cityscape, a relationship I did not have with other major Pakistani cities. My research gave me the chance to reconnect with Karachi in ways I had not known it before. Beyond the main streets, tucked away from plain sight behind the residential and commercial neighborhoods are enclaves where the city’s poor live. Growing up in Karachi, I had never stepped foot in these settlements, but during fieldwork I learned to see and navigate through them from the perspective of my informants, traveling with them in rickshaws from colony to colony through winding inner streets lined with open sewage streams and heaps of garbage. This was a different Karachi, a whole new city within the city that I knew.

Before fieldwork, I was unfamiliar with the ground situation of khwaja sira activism in Pakistan<sup>4</sup>. All I knew was that gender ambiguous people had started engaging in activism in

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<sup>4</sup> I did not get the opportunity to conduct preliminary fieldwork because I spent my pre-fieldwork academic career preparing for dissertation research on queer activism in Kolkata, India. Unfortunately, being of Pakistani origin worked against me, and ultimately visa constraints prevented me from pursuing my intended research. As I recovered from my post-visa misfortune,

recent years, and that they had won a kind of public recognition that other sexual minorities could barely imagine. Studying khwaja sira activism was timely not only because gender variant people had gained legal legitimacy in 2009 when the Supreme Court granted them rights, but also their activism had propelled forward in the wake of the Court’s decision in their favor. Over the year prior to fieldwork, I had managed to closely follow one Karachi-based khwaja sira group named “Gender Solidarity Society” (GSS) (pseudonym) through its Facebook page and website. Unlike other groups, GSS appeared to be an active organization that posted regular status updates of its activities, shared journalistic and educational material, and made demands on matters of public policy concerning khwaja siras. I was drawn to GSS’s activism, and in light of the constraints I was facing at the time, the organization provided a much-welcomed avenue for research.



I was advised by my dissertation committee to consider Pakistan as an alternative country for fieldwork.

As a field site, Karachi was unique in that it was composed of a heterogeneous population of khwaja siras. Post-colonial Karachi, the largest city and financial hub of Pakistan, has been a city of migrants since the partition of the South Asian subcontinent in 1947. The influx of people into Karachi during the various phases of migration coincided with an increase in squatter settlements, land mafia, ethnic violence, party politics, congestion, and poor housing and sanitation (Gayer 2007; Nichola 2010; Verkaaik 2009). Karachi was the chosen destination of khwaja siras who come to this city from across Pakistan in search of work. As a result, the khwaja sira communities of Karachi, representing a diverse ethnic and linguistic mix, were less homogenous than those residing in other parts of the country. These khwaja siras settled down in shantytowns like other poor migrant workers.

### Research Process

Ethnography can reveal both the points of convergence and divergence between local cultural practices and the political positions of a movement's constituencies (Burdick 1995, 362). I drew upon this insight to investigate the interrelationship between the culture of khwaja siras and the cultural dimensions of khwaja sira activism between January 2011 and January 2012, and from December 2012 to March 2013. Focusing on both categories helped to shed light on the consistencies and inconsistencies within and between ideology and practice, public and private, image and reality, the mundane and the extraordinary, the everyday of *Mohallahs* (neighborhoods) and the everyday of activist spaces, and between official positions and internal dynamics. In studying khwaja sira culture, I considered the general khwaja sira population

spread across the city's slums. This cluster of the city's inhabitants included both native Karachites as well as long-term and seasonal migrants<sup>5</sup>.

The other component of my investigation was khwaja sira activism. During fieldwork, I met with several prominent khwaja sira activist leaders but my research centered primarily on GSS<sup>6</sup>. Founded by Payal (pseudonym), a khwaja sira in her late forties, GSS was the first community run organization in the province of Sindh to get registered, and in 2011 it was among the few registered khwaja sira groups in the country. It had been in operation in Karachi since 2009, and it functioned primarily as an advocacy group which spoke on behalf of khwaja siras. I investigated GSS's activism and its daily activities, the social relationships among its members, and its ties with khwaja sira communities and allies (e.g., other sexual minority groups, NGOs, media outlets, etc.). By examining these relationships and accompanying the organization's members to both activist and non-activist events, I learned how the culture of khwaja siras factored into their activism, and the extent to which it held back and facilitated their efforts. I interviewed over 100 khwaja siras residing in various parts of Karachi. The interviewees included a mix of Karachi residents and migrant khwaja siras, and the interviews were conducted in the homes of khwaja siras living in various parts of the city. I conducted the initial round of interviews with key members of GSS. However, about three months into fieldwork, having exhausted my contacts and facing increasing resistance from potential interviewees, I decided to enlist the help of a khwaja sira, Nadia (pseudonym), who I hired as my research assistant. Nadia

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<sup>5</sup> I am unable to estimate the khwaja sira population of Karachi in the absence of reliable census data. However, in 2010 the Social Welfare Department of the Government of Sindh registered a mere 2500 khwaja siras, an indisputable underestimation of the khwaja sira population in a city of an estimated 21 million people.

<sup>6</sup> My first point of contact with GSS was through Facebook where I introduced myself to the organization's representatives, informed them about the nature of my work, and set up tentative meetings before my arrival in Karachi.



took me to the homes of gender ambiguous people across Karachi, introduced me to them, and was instrumental in facilitating the interview process.

In addition to being my research assistant, Nadia also became a key informant. I quickly realized that Nadia was a marginal figure within her social network, an “inside-outsider” of sorts. As an immigrant khwaja sira but long-time resident of Karachi, an active though often discounted member of GSS, and as Payal’s *celā* (student initiate), Nadia had intimate knowledge not only of khwaja sira affairs but also of GSS and her *guru*’s (mentor) extended family. Moreover, she was well connected to a vast network of both migrant and local khwaja siras. Though initially guarded and secretive as most khwaja siras were with strangers, Nadia quickly opened up to me about the history and inner workings of GSS and khwaja sira communities. Needless to say, our relationship was mutually beneficial, and in addition to an employer, Nadia found in me a confidant.

When I first met GSS’s president, Payal, in February of 2011, the organization was on the brink of termination due to lack of resources, such as the funding and skills required to keep it afloat. Payal, a poor, illiterate khwaja sira who was desperate for help, asked me to assist her in revitalizing GSS. Although I was initially reluctant to work for an organization I wanted to study, I eventually agreed to volunteer my time and services to GSS. Volunteering became a valuable participant observation technique that gave me daily access to the organization and to those affiliated with it<sup>7</sup>. The tasks that I performed for GSS gave me the opportunity not only to assist khwaja sira activists, but also to gain a deep understanding of the organization’s activist ideology and practice. Moreover, I was made the official photographer of GSS since I was the

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<sup>7</sup> My duties included a host of administrative tasks, such as handling GSS’s online communication and content, drafting letters and documents, visually documenting organizational activities, and accompanying GSS’s executive committee to official meetings and events.

only one in the organization who owned a digital camera, which in turn ensured my admission into khwaja sira activist and cultural events<sup>8</sup>. Hence, the human and technological resources that I was able to offer gave me front seat access to rich first-hand information.

I had to maintain a cautious balance between my researcher and volunteer roles. As an anthropologist, my goal was to learn about GSS's activism through direct involvement in its everyday affairs, and as an administrative aide, my job was to perform the tasks asked of me by GSS's governing committee without interfering much in their process. This is not to say that my intervention had no impact on the organization since I undoubtedly played a role in streamlining certain administrative tasks, but I refrained from imposing my own views on GSS's leadership (except when asked) because I was in the process of understanding the organization's activism.

My daily schedule varied, and there were days when I had to stay out all night at khwaja sira social events. I often slept over at GSS's office which also doubled as Payal's residence. Whenever possible, I helped in the preparation of various events, and engaged in khwaja sira rituals of reciprocity. In addition, I travelled with GSS members on official and social visits to other cities, including Lahore, Islamabad, Rawalpindi, Hyderabad, Sehwan, and Kasur. I supplemented my 12-month fieldwork in Karachi with two months of research on "Association of Khwaja Siras" (AKS) (pseudonym), a community based organization (CBO) in Lahore. During my time in Lahore, I made daily visits to AKS where I gathered data through formal interviews, casual conversations, through participant observation in the organization's activities, and by shadowing activists to khwaja sira cultural events. This fieldwork experience was

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<sup>8</sup> GSS's activist events included public protests, meetings with stakeholders, trainings and workshops, television and documentary film shoots, etc. Khwaja sira cultural activities included rituals (e.g., initiation ceremonies, death rituals, rituals of reciprocity), birthday parties and social gatherings, conflict resolution meetings, etc.

particularly valuable for it shed light on regional cultural differences among khwaja sira communities.

### Toils of the Field

During the first couple of months of fieldwork, I was frustrated with my research and I often wondered what I had gotten myself into. However, I gradually managed to deal with, and in some cases, resolve the problems I was facing. I now turn to the slew of challenges I faced during data collection. I present a lengthier than usual account of the methodological problems I encountered because they shed light on my theoretical positions while serving as supporting evidence for my key arguments about khwaja sira identity politics.

Recruiting potential informants is a trying process for any anthropologist, and getting khwaja siras to partake in my study was no exception. Recruitment was most problematic at the onset of my research when I was interviewing independently, but it became easier after I hired Nadia. Khwaja siras were reluctant to being interviewed because they did not wish to reveal the clandestine aspects of their lives to ordinary people. What impeded the recruitment process further was the presumption of khwaja siras that I was affiliated with a local television channel. The word “media,” which popularly refers to television media in Pakistan, had gained currency due to the explosion of local and foreign television channels. Khwaja siras assumed that I must be a “media *vālā*” since people from television channels were among the few outsiders who had shown an interest in interviewing khwaja siras in recent years<sup>9</sup>. For instance, Kajal seemed a bit

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<sup>9</sup> Although I do not deny the superficial parallels between my scholarly enterprise and the work of media outlets that sought to cover stories on khwaja siras, I view the latter to be primarily in the business of entertainment geared for the consumption of mass television audiences. In contrast, my fieldwork was not meant to expose or to sensationalize the lives of this marginalized population, but to gain through long-term empirical research a deep and empathetic

alarmed when I called her to set a time for an interview. She said, “Interview? Oh No! The last time I did an interview, they took my photograph and published it next to the picture of a naked girl. Will you bring a cameraman as well?” “No,” I said, “I will come alone and I will only record your voice if you give me permission.” Kajal asked me to call her back in five minutes, which I did, but by then she had conveniently switched off her phone. These challenges eventually lead me to hire Nadia, who took me to the homes of khwaja siras in various parts of Karachi, many of whom she personally knew, and encouraged them to participate in my study. Tina’s statement below sums up Nadia’s significance to the recruitment process.

One day someone like you came to interview us. All the good things we told them, they didn’t show any of that...we get scared because the media shoots one thing with us, but then shows something different on TV. I opened up to you because this sister who came with you gave me the confidence to do so...otherwise, I would have lied to you.

Recruitment became easier through Nadia’s assistance, but many khwaja siras continued to express their fear of being interviewed. Hereafter, Nadia and I decided to replace the term “interview” with “conversation” (*guftagū /bāt cīt*) when recruiting potential informants, which seemed to work better since it was as a less threatening alternative. I do not find my deployment of this term misleading but expedient and necessary since “interview” had very specific connotations for khwaja siras, relating largely to the harmful impacts of sensational television reporting and mass-circulated images (as opposed to scholarly text) that threatened the well-being of khwaja siras (see *The Question of Positionality and Ethics* for more information).

Another problem I faced during the interview process was getting respondents to clearly and honestly answer questions about sex and sexuality. With respect to these topics, I noticed a stark difference between interview narratives and casual conversations, that is, between what was

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understanding of the multiple processes that accounted for their difference and promoted their disenfranchisement.

revealed on and off record, and between what interviewees said about themselves and what I heard about them from others. The incongruences between what people say or think they do and what they actually do is not new to anthropologists. But sometimes research participants deliberately try to deceive the ethnographer. Deceptions are meaningless in the absence of the truths they aim to conceal. Hence, the researcher must not only analyze practices of deception but also sift through them in order to discover what is being hidden and why. Nadia and Nazo for instance, blatantly lied to me about certain aspects of their lives, but when I turned off the recorder, they admitted to being dishonest and then proceeded to reveal the truth. However, despite my probing, some were deliberately vague in discussing sensitive topics both on and off record. I see four intertwined reasons for informant deception and their narrative contradictions.

First, many of the methodological challenges I faced during fieldwork had to do with the fact that I was studying a sexual minority group, and sex and sexuality tend to invite judgment. Open discussions about sex can be tricky in any context, and significantly more so in conservative cultures. Dominant beliefs pertaining to sexuality in Pakistan (and elsewhere) stem from a combination of religious and cultural beliefs that influence the views of the general public and of khwaja siras. People's sexual practices are often used as a moral compass to determine their level of respectability and credibility, particularly in contexts where sex is a taboo subject. Hence, informants are typically uncomfortable discussing the nature of their private sexual desires and behavior with outsiders in fear of being adversely judged. These factors contributed to informant secrecy and deception during interviews and generated contradictions between interview and non-interview narratives.

Second, the fear among khwaja siras that I was affiliated with a media outlet not only surfaced during recruitment, but also during interviews. As mentioned earlier, many khwaja siras

feared that their reputations and safety might be compromised in the event that their interview is leaked to media outlets. Consequently, they lied to me about aspects of their lives that posed potential risks. Third, the contradictions between interview and non-interview narratives had much to do with how respondents wanted to be represented in interviews. Image management is a technique that informants commonly employ in order to make a good impression with the interviewer, and often their responses are guided by the kind of information they believe the interviewer is seeking. However, in the case of khwaja siras, I do not consider image management merely as isolated acts among individual informants but as collective praxes among khwaja siras who had much at stake in positively representing themselves and their communities. Fourth, studying an organization or a hierarchically structured social system can be complicated since informants may fear how they will be affected if they reveal sensitive information to the researcher. Disclosing confidential information can negatively impact their social relationships with others within the group, especially with their superiors. For instance, Nadia was afraid that she would get into trouble with her guru, Payal, if she divulged covert information to me. However, she was surprisingly candid when I was not recording her voice, that is, she was forthcoming in the absence of incriminating evidence linking her to the leaked information.

Despite the aforementioned complications in interviewing, khwaja siras gradually opened up to me. According to Lieberman, “the more intimate the personal relationship, the less [meaningful the]...deception” (1977, 67), and Murray suggests that “secrecy (and privacy) are not absolutes, but correlatives depending upon the relationship of actor to audiences” (1977, 324). Similarly, the level of trust between my research consultants and I grew over the duration of fieldwork, and deceiving me became increasingly less purposeful to them. Moreover, it became progressively difficult for informants to maintain the ruse in my continued presence in

their everyday lives. By my sixth month into fieldwork, my research participants and I felt fairly comfortable in each other's company, be it at GSS's office or at a khwaja sira's house, at an activist event or a ritual, or even out in a crowded bazaar. The information I managed to obtain over time about their corporeality and sexuality was possible only through long-term fieldwork. Research on khwaja siras that relies solely on interviews or is conducted over a short duration is likely to produce skewed data. However, ethnographic fieldwork allows the anthropologist to identify and make sense of the contradictions between various sources of data, and to separate fact from fiction. Importantly, in the process of making sense of these discrepancies, I gained a better understanding of the type of information khwaja siras concealed from outsiders. Seeking the truth about different aspects of the lives of informants was just as important as understanding what was kept secret and why.

Given that I, like other outsiders, was a victim of khwaja sira duplicity, I find it expedient to describe the process through which I came to understand the realities underlying the façade of deception. One of the ways in which I gained access to truths about khwaja siras was through my research assistant. Nadia not only helped me recruit khwaja siras for my study but was also present during interviews. Interviews immediately followed recruitment since respondents had the tendency of agreeing to speak with me only to later avoid committing to an interview appointment. This meant that Nadia had to be present during many of the interviews, not only because some interlocutors were uncomfortable speaking to me in her absence, but also because the homes of many khwaja siras were single-room spaces and there was no place for Nadia to go. Her presence during interviews had its pros and cons. For instance, in situations where she personally knew informants, Nadia revealed intimate details about their lives before I conducted the interviews, and pointed out who had lied to me about what afterwards. I was not entirely

opposed to Nadia gossiping to me about her friends because it improved my understanding of the kind of information khwaja siras hid from and how they wished to represent themselves to strangers.

Studying an organization comes with its own set of challenges for the researcher working under institutional constraints. In formal working environments, researchers are often subjected to gatekeeping, a process whereby access to information and events to outsiders is controlled (Armitage 2008, 167). While the working atmosphere at GSS was fairly informal and I was granted admission into most organizational activities, there were nonetheless times when I was excluded. Language is often used as an exclusionary tactic. During fieldwork, I often found myself left out, sometimes deliberately, from conversations between khwaja siras. Initially, they used Farsi, their secret vernacular, to have private conversations in my presence. Eventually, I learned Farsi through Nadia who helped me to create a dictionary of Farsi terms. However, my lack of proficiency in any Pakistani language other than Urdu continued to prevent me from following valuable discussions that were intentionally articulated in other local languages.

### The Question of Positionality and Ethics

My fieldwork experience and findings were tinged by my positionality as a non-khwaja sira, a man, and as an insider-outsider of sorts. Alternatively, my fieldwork encounters would have been very different had I been a gender ambiguous person. Interlocutors would have been more forthcoming with me about their clandestine lifestyle if I were a khwaja sira, in which case they would not have engaged in the representational strategies they employed. As an insider of sorts, my research findings may not have been so heavily focused on the themes of identity politics and representation. For instance, one day, Nadia suggested that I pose as a khwaja sira



during interviews: “I will teach you how to dance like us and speak Farsi, so when khwaja siras see you dance they will become happy and be at ease with you... Then they will tell you everything about their life.” Although I refused to partake in Nadia’s recommended unethical practice, her comments nonetheless suggest that I would have not only had a different relationship with informants, but also I would have obtained very different data had I been a khwaja sira.

An ethical concern raised by this project relates to my complicity in revealing the particulars of the lives of khwaja siras. Informants feared that exposing sensitive information about gender ambiguous people would pose potential risks and damage their reputation in mainstream society. Even though I received permission from research participants, I have had to mull over the potential ramifications of disclosing certain aspects their lives. To what extent am I doing them a disservice by exposing facets of their lived experience that they attempted to conceal? Below, I address the unique ethical dilemmas linked to my project since the relevant literature and the American Anthropological Association’s “Code of Ethics” (2009) and statement on “Principles of Professional Responsibility” (2012) do not offer specific guidelines on how to manage secret knowledge.

First, I use pseudonyms for informants and organizations so as to protect their privacy. In order to maintain anonymity, I have refrained from identifying key research participants with associated pseudonyms in the photographs that appear in this dissertation. Second, there was a lack of consensus, especially between the older and younger generation of activists, about how best to represent khwaja siras. Younger activists were beginning to take carefully measured steps through advocacy to shatter myths about their bodies and sexuality within mainstream discourse. However, their progress was hindered by pressures from khwaja sira elders and by fears that the

rights granted to them would be rescinded if the government discovered these realities.

Nonetheless, not all khwaja siras were opposed to baring the truth. Third, gender ambiguous people tended to voluntarily expose clandestine information about khwaja siras in conflict situations (see chapters 4 and 6). Far from being well-guarded, the secrets of khwaja siras were regularly exposed by elements internal to their social system.

Fourth, my writing addresses an English-speaking academic audience and it will be less accessible to a large majority of the Pakistani public that privileges image over text. Fifth, numerous academic and journalistic accounts as well as documentaries and television shows have already highlighted facts about the physical characteristics and sexual behaviors of khwaja siras. Hence, my publications will not be the first to divulge explicit details about them, and if their practices were not already known, I would have reached different decisions about reporting them. Sixth, reliable accounts about gender ambiguous people are not only few and far between but they also compete with a plethora of unreliable narratives and cultural assumptions. Such mythical discourse circulates through khwaja sira media advocacy, by word of mouth, and through texts and images that reify fictions about khwaja siras. In effect, these disparate reports perpetuate a sense of vagueness about gender ambiguous people in mainstream society and help to maintain their personal and communal safety. Finally, at the time of fieldwork, most gender ambiguous people were oblivious about the state's stance regarding many aspects of their lives, which factored into their desire to maintain secrecy. I take comfort in apprehending the precise legal protections granted to khwaja siras, the excavation of which was a result of this research (see Chapter 7). However, had these legal stipulations not existed, I would have reconsidered my decision to write about certain sensitive issues.

Although the AAA's ethical guidelines "articulate the primacy of the interests of research subjects...they also recognize that the researcher's own judgment is necessary, and that this should include regard to the potential outcome, which is situational ethics" (Barber 2003, 139). My purpose is not to reveal secrets or merely to bust myths about khwaja sira culture and lifestyle since existing investigations have already, to a more or lesser degree and with varying levels of accuracy, delved into the details of their lives. Rather, my objective is to provide a detailed and reliable account, from my own informed perspective, of the subjective experiences of this stigmatized group in order to demonstrate how secrets were maintained, how khwaja siras outwardly projected themselves to mainstream society, and to explain the larger structural processes at work that impelled them to engage in the games of secrecy, deception and collective misrepresentation. Beyond intellectual curiosity and adding to the knowledge reserve, the aim here is also to set the groundwork for activists, NGOs and policy-makers to take the necessary steps towards ameliorating the lives of khwaja siras.

### **Scope of Study**

This dissertation contributes to several dynamic modes of scholarly inquiry. First, it revisits the relationship between stigma and sexuality by recasting it in the context of political action, and illustrating how the link between the two informs khwaja sira subjectivity, identity and activism. It also highlights that sexuality and sexual deceit are products of class, colonialism, nationalism, transnationalism, legal reform, and popular religion. Second, this project locates the significance of culture and ethnography in social movement, queer and transgender studies. It is particularly valuable since contemporary anthropological research on trans and gender variant people in non-Euro-American contexts has been few and far between (Blackwood 2010; Johnson 1997; Kulick

1998; Nanda 1990; Prieur 1998; Reddy 2005; Sinnott 2004)<sup>10</sup>.

Third, it makes a necessary and timely empirical contribution to the sparsely explored territory of sexual and gender diversity in Pakistan, while reflecting contemporary trends in queer social justice in Islamic contexts (Boellstorff 2005; Davies 2010; Gaudio 2009; Kugle 2010, 2013; Najmabadi 2014). Although there is a substantial volume of anthropological research on queer communities in India (Boyce 2006, 2007; Dave 2008, 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Reddy 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007; Hall 1997, 2005; Hall and Donovan 1996; Nanda 1990, 1993, 2002; Cohen 1995a, 1995b, 2002, 2005, 2012), comparable research in Pakistan is practically non-existent. The majority of the studies on sexual minorities in Pakistan have been conducted either by NGOs that rely largely on survey data or by health professionals and students who focus primarily on biomedical or psychological approaches to sexuality (Altaf 2008; Baloch 2009; Baqi et al. 2006; Collumbien 2009a, 2009b; Haider 2008a, 2008b; Haider and Bano 2006; Jami 2005; Khan and Khilji 2002; Khannani 2008; Khilji 2003, 2008; Rehan et al. 2009; Saleem et al. 2011; Sindhi 2011; Wijngaarden et al. 2011, 2013). The little scholarly literature that exists is either non-ethnographic (Awan and Sheeraz 2011; Hahm 2010; Junejo, 1994; Mithani and Burfat 2003; Pamment 2010; Shaheen 2009; Toor 2011) or based on short-term studies (Afzal 2005; Mohyuddin and Ali 2013; Naqvi and Mujtaba 1997; Redding 2014).

Fourth, this investigation is a form of engaged scholarship that is responsive to publicly-oriented interests. Leap and Lewin define publicly engaged queer anthropology as one that is “concerned with the processes through which private...persons come together to form a public...[to] deal with...processes that work against the emergence of such formations” (2009,

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<sup>10</sup> Although early “salvage anthropology” type studies routinely focused on indigenous non-normative gender/sexual minorities, they presented a limited picture of them as Noble Savages living in societies that offered “an honored place for at least some forms of transgending or same-sex sexual activity (Weston 1993, 344-5).

2). This project is as much about “questions of desire, personal identity and erotic interest” as it is about “sexual citizenship, belonging, public morality, and social justice” (2009, 2).

Consequently, the content herein will, in addition to scholars, be valuable to trans organizations, NGOs and policy-makers.

## **Dissertation Chapters**

Drawing on religious, colonial, and legal sources, Chapter 2 provides a discussion of the history of gender and sexual ambiguity in Islam and Pakistan. It also provides an overview of the present-day circumstances of gender ambiguous people. The content of this chapter serves to illuminate throughout the dissertation that popular understandings of gender/sexual nonnormativity did not always match scholarly history and theology.

Part two of the dissertation focuses on the culture and subjectivity of ordinary gender ambiguous people. Chapter 3 offers a look into the world of khwaja siras, including a discussion of khwaja sira identities, the gender and sexuality of gender ambiguous people, and their social structure. It describes the structuring of identities and practices from their vantage point, which, later chapters demonstrate, diverged from mainstream constructions of “khwaja sira.” In Chapter 4, I focus on stigma and its impact of the relationships among gender ambiguous people. I identify the sources of stigma by discussing the religious beliefs of khwaja siras and by describing popular conceptions and portrayals of gender ambiguous people. I argue that religious and social stigma produced states of incertitude within and conflict among khwaja siras. Chapter 5 describes the cultural and structural violence experienced by khwaja siras in everyday life, and the games of secrecy and deception they played in response to their hostile environments. This

chapter covers khwaja sira livelihood practices and their social relationships with biological kin, partners and neighbors.

Part three centers of khwaja sira activism. In Chapter 6, I discuss the internal politics of khwaja sira organizations. I demonstrate that the sociocultural problems of khwaja sira communities trickled into activist spaces, where internalized stigma among community leaders produced dissonance within and between their organizations. Chapter 7 highlights the confusions stemming from differences in understandings of “khwaja sira” among key stakeholders. Although the virtual identities deployed by khwaja sira activists were marginally beneficial to gender ambiguous people, they impeded the state’s efforts to “mainstream” khwaja siras. Chapter 8 centers on the deceptive external identity politics of activist leaders. It illustrates how khwaja sira leaders aimed to normalize gender ambiguous people in the public consciousness, and sheds light on the game-like strategies they deployed in interactions with adversaries. I conclude the dissertation with Chapter 9, which contains an assessment of the impact of khwaja sira politics on government policies aimed at rehabilitating gender ambiguous people, reflections on the future of khwaja sira rights and activism, and suggestions for potential directions in countering the problems associated with identity, stigma and marginalization.

## **Chapter 2: Gender Ambiguity in Islam, South Asia and Contemporary Pakistan**

The treatment of sex/gender nonnormativity in Islam is as diverse as Islam itself. Historical and scholarly sources reveal theological differences in constructions of sex, gender and sexuality. Meanwhile, the history of the Indian subcontinent indicates that individuals with gender and genital ambiguities went from having important social functions to being criminalized. However, in present-day Pakistan, the laws related to khwaja siras have both constrained and empowered gender ambiguous people, but these policies diverge from similar laws in other Islamic nation-states. Despite the rights granted to them, khwaja siras continue to suffer from stigma and marginalization in mainstream society. Their oppression and exclusion became the impetus for khwaja sira activism and NGO and state intervention. This chapter explores sex/gender ambiguity in Islam, a brief history of third sex/gender in South Asia, and a description of Pakistani laws related to non-normative sex and sexuality. The information that I provide here will serve to illuminate throughout this dissertation that the identity politics of khwaja siras was both informed by but also departed from religious and scholarly understandings of sex/gender ambiguity in Islam and in South Asian antiquity. This is because popular understandings of this topic in Pakistan did not always match religious history and theology, which in itself lacks consensus.

### **Islam, Geography and Law**

#### Islamic Approaches to Sexual and Gender Ambiguity

Among the various forms of sex/gender nonnormativity, contemporary Islamic law accepts most unequivocally the condition of intersexuality, where individuals are born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal, chromosomal and/or genital features. Medieval Muslim jurists

addressed the issue of intersexuality because it presented a predicament for the Islamic worldview's strict gendered and sexed boundaries (Bucar 2010, 604). Although they were a biological reality, without a precise gender/sex, intersexuals had no point of entry into the social world (Sanders 1991, 88). As a solution, jurists advocated assigning a gender role to intersexuals, and later, when the technology became available, some thinkers supported corporeal modifications to make the intersexual's sex more distinct (Bucar 2010, 604).

Today Islamic jurists make a distinction between “ambiguous” and “non-ambiguous” intersexuals. The latter category includes either “males with some extra elements or females with some extra elements” (Cilardo 1986, 129). According to most interpretations of *shari'ah* (Islamic law), the sex of intersexuals with unambiguous genitalia can be determined at birth. The “ambiguous” category (*khunthā /khunsā mushkil*) consists of those whose physiological features do not allow us to determine their prevailing sex (Cilardo 1986, 129). The opinions of the various sects and schools of Islam differ on ways of determining or assigning an ambiguous intersexual's sex/gender. While some advocate assigning a sex at birth, most agree that the sex of ambiguous intersexuals should be determined at puberty when they develop either male or female physical characteristics (e.g., signs of facial hair, nocturnal spermatic emissions, or a flat chest in the case of men) (Cilardo 1986, 132-3). Some schools accept an individual's personal declaration about their physiology as confirmation of their sex/gender, but this testimony can be rejected if the person's sexual organs are known to be ambiguous (Cilardo 1986, 133-4). Finally, those ambiguous intersexuals who do not develop distinctive markings of sex at puberty are subjected to and granted special rules and rights, which relate to such practices as circumcision, prayer, pilgrimage, marriage, witnessing, punishment, inheritance, death, and so on (Cilardo 1986, 135-50).



Islamic approaches to intersexuality demonstrate that Muslim jurists focused on external physical characteristics as determinants of an individual's sex/gender. The body is given credence as the key marker of gender. However, I later demonstrate that crucial differences exist among Islamic sects, especially between Sunni and Shia theology, with regard to prioritizing and determining sex and gender.

But how does Islam approach those who are not intersexual but present signs of gender ambiguity (i.e., in terms of embodiment and role) beginning in early childhood? In his examination of the Quran's use of gendered terms and images, religious historian, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, representing a less common viewpoint, argues that the Quran simultaneously invokes gender difference (i.e., between male and female) and ambiguity (2010). However, neo-traditionalists typically maintain that God arranged not only humanity but the entire cosmos into distinct and unambiguous gendered pairs (Kugle 2010, 245). Such orthodox interpretations contradict contemporary biology's discovery of complex gendered behaviors in animal species, and ignore modern physics' long abandoned simplistic dichotomies (Kugle 2010, 246). Kugle contends that scientific breakthroughs should deepen Quranic interpretations and enable a break from patriarchal predeterminations (Kugle 2010, 246). For instance, Quranic verses that describe human diversity in terms of shades of colors are often taken literally as referring to racial difference while overlooking other forms of human variance as evidenced by modern science and human experience (Kugle 2010, 247-8).

In addition to the Quran, Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, provides key philosophical concepts that relate to gender ambiguity. According to Sufi thought, the heart is perceived as the seat of the soul, where the soul is understood to be an ambiguous force, a consciousness, which connects the spirit and the body (Kugle 2010, 236-7). "The

soul...perceives itself to be female or male, or possibly both-male-and-female or neither-male-nor-female” (Kugle 2010, 237). Sufi thinkers locate the soul as being immersed in gender duality. Importantly, khwaja siras in present-day Pakistan attributed their gender difference to a feminine heart/soul, which they claimed to possess.

The *hadīth*<sup>11</sup> and oral narratives about Prophet Muhammad provide evidence that he interacted with gender ambiguous individuals known as *mukhannath* (effeminate men or sometimes transvestite men) and eunuchs during his lifetime in Medina (Babayan and Najmabadi 2008, 163; Kugle 2010, 249). Kugle’s analysis of early Islamic texts and hadith reveals that mukhannaths (pl. *mukhannathun*) were defined by their gender performance (i.e., mannerisms, speech and attire) rather than sexual behavior and desire, and their gender ambiguity was seen as an innate disposition (Kugle 2010, 253).<sup>12</sup> Gender crossing was considered blameworthy only for those who were not effeminate by nature and adopted such behavior purely for ulterior motives (*takallufi*) (Kugle 2010, 253-4). Kugle contends that Prophet Muhammad’s condemnation that “God cursed the males who appear like females and the females who appear like males,” only applies to takallufi mukhannaths, a belief that diverged from dominant interpretations of this hadīth in Pakistan. Many scholars claim that the Islamic tradition accepts mukhannaths contrary to the popular belief that Prophet Muhammad condemned them. The Prophet’s wives were regularly visited by mukhannaths inside their rooms (Kugle 2010, 250). According to several hadīth, the Prophet banished a mukhannath who frequented his house, not due to his gender difference but because he overstepped ethical norms by using his knowledge of women’s affairs to rouse men to be intimate with women out of wedlock (Kugle 2010, 23).

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<sup>11</sup> Sayings and teachings ascribed to Prophet Mohammad.

<sup>12</sup> Islamic holy literature suggests that there were also “some women who ‘assume[d] the manner of men,’ who were known as *mutarajjulāt*” (Bolich 2007, 124).

Mukhannath had special functions in early Islamic society as entertainers, singers and comedians, and as intermediaries who had access both to the private domain of women as well as the public sphere of men (Kugle 2010, 254). However, sources rarely mention the mukhannath following their persecution in the eight-century by an Umayyad governor of Medina who ordered such individuals to be castrated (Kugle 2010, 255). They later reappeared in Baghdad during the Abbasid Empire, but by then the Islamic discourse on gender ambiguity had been replaced with a focus on homosexuality, which viewed the mukhannath as men who played the passive role during same-sex anal intercourse (Kugle 2010, 255-6; Rowson 1991, 693).

Today, many Islamic jurists variously define mukhannath with respect to gender ambiguity, a lack of sexual desire (Haneef 2011, 101), and/or sexual incapacity (e.g., the inability to sustain an erection) (Bolich 2007, 124). They condemn “artificial” mukhannaths or those who “deliberately deviate from the norm of their gender,” but generally accept those “who innately suffer from some kind of behavioral abnormality,” so long as they do not engage in illegitimate sexual behavior (Haneef 2011, 101 and 106). Some of the shari’ah laws pertaining to erotically inclined mukhannaths include punishments for committing sodomy, prohibition from mingling with and marrying women, and restrictions against providing testimony in court on the grounds that they lack moral rectitude and cannot be considered credible witnesses (Haneef 2011, 101). Hence, juridical logic expects mukhannaths to be either asexual or unable to engage in sexual behavior. In contrast, in contemporary Pakistan, the term mukhannath was largely believed to be applicable to someone with genital ambiguities.

In addition to mukhannaths, the second category of gender ambiguous individuals present during the Prophet’s time was the eunuch. The Prophet’s first documented encounter with a eunuch was when a woman named Marya, presented to him as a gift by an Egyptian governor,

was escorted to Medina by her castrated servant (Kugle 2010, 250). The eunuch was allowed to live with Marya as her servant once it was established that he did not have sexual access to her (Kugle 2010, 251). The decision validated the value and social role of eunuchs in Islamic society. The Prophet spoke against the practice of castrating slaves, but those castrated elsewhere by non-Muslims were accepted into the Islamic empire where they served as household servants (Kugle 2010, 250). The gender ambiguity of eunuchs differed from that of the mukhannaths in that it was socially imposed rather than being an intrinsic trait, and yet, what enhanced this ambiguity was the deficiency of “testes-produced hormones” in eunuchs following the removal of their sexual organs (Kugle 2010, 253). Due to their ambiguity, eunuchs came to be seen as neither men nor women and therefore, able to mix freely with both (Kugle 2010, 252). Their gender status enabled them to serve as a “human veil” during communal prayer where they were instructed to stand in a row behind men but before women (Kugle 2010, 252).

By the turn of the twentieth century, eunuchs were serving this and a number of other important functions at the *Ka’ba*, the sacred site of pilgrimage for Muslims in Makkah (i.e., Mecca), and at *Al-Masjid an-Nabawi* (the Mosque of Prophet Mohammad) in Medina, where they were employed (Burton 1857; Young 1993). Originally purchased as slaves by the Ottoman administration from Ethiopia and Sudan, these eunuchs were responsible for cleaning both holy sites, and for keeping men and women apart during pilgrimage at the Ka’ba (Young 1993, 290).

In actual practice the *aghawat* could not physically divide the crowd by sex, but they could stand for a neutral category, separating and coordinating the categories of men and women. Their castrated state made it possible for them to touch women without breaking their ritual purity (*wudu*). (Young 1993, 291-2)

*Tawashi* was the generic name of the eunuchs of the holy mosques (Burton 1857, 418), but the title given to them was *aghawat* (or *agha* in short), which means elder, elder sibling, chief or master in Turkish (Young 1993, 290). The term denoted respect for these black eunuchs of high

stature. Some sources claim that eunuchs still serve the mosque in Makkah, but they are fewer in number today than in the early 1900s (Young 1993, 298). Khwaja sira informants often mentioned these individuals and saw them as their ancestors. However, they knew little about these eunuchs other than the role they played in the ritual purification of the holy sites of Makkah and Medina.

Religious history and holy literature indicate that Islam recognizes four distinct types of beings: men/males, women/females, ambiguous intersexuals (*khunsā mushkil*), and gender ambiguous persons (*mukhannath*) (Bolich 2007, 124). In addition, Islam created space for another nonnormative figure: the eunuch. Though not a separate sex/gender, they could be seen as sexed/gendered owing to their castration-induced hormone deficiency and subsequent development of female physical characteristic (e.g., breast formation and loss of body hair). Importantly, Islamic jurists did not clearly define the demarcation between the categories of sex and gender.

### Third Sex/Gender in South Asia

South Asia has a rich history of gender ambiguity, one that Gayatri Reddy (2005) broadly divides into four chronological time periods: ancient, medieval, colonial and contemporary. Evidence of third-sex/gender figures appears foremost in ancient Indian texts from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions where they are referred to as *kliba*, *pandaka*, *trtiyapraktri* and *napumsaka* (2005, 19). The meanings of these terms variously included unmales, third sex, third nature, eunuch, “someone ‘who was sterile, impotent, castrated, a transvestite, a man who had oral sex with other men, a man who had anal sex, a man with mutilated or defective sexual organs, a hermaphrodite, or finally, a man who produced only female children’” (2005, 21). This

suggests that anyone who did not fit into the binary gender system was clumped into this diverse range of states and practices.

The historical record of the medieval period focuses on eunuchs or castrated men of the royal Mughal courts. The eunuchs of the medieval era are particularly relevant to this project since the term *khwaja sira*, which became popular in Pakistan in the first decade of the twenty-first century, emerges from this era of South Asian antiquity, from where it can be traced as far back to the eunuch slave trade that existed during the time of Prophet Muhammad. The practice of appointing eunuchs in the royal courts thrived during the Roman and Ottoman Empires.

The procedures by which males became eunuchs...involved removal of the testes or both testes and penis [of young boys]. Because...Islam prohibited the practice of castration but not the use of castrated slaves...[the operation]...was performed by Christians (and perhaps Jews) in...Ethiopia, and in other locations... (Gomez 2005, 37-8)

In the case of the Ottoman Empire, it was the African eunuch who appears to have been preferred. The practice of appointing eunuchs in the royal courts is known to have existed in other Islamic empires, including the Mamluk (1250-1517) and Safavid (1501-1736) dynasties, and eventually the Mughals (1526-1857) also adopted it.

The title given to the chief eunuch of the Mughal court was *khwaja sira* (Manucci 1906, 350), an Urdu term borrowed directly from Persian/Farsi. Eunuchs were typically organized hierarchically with the senior or chief eunuch directing junior eunuchs below him. Chief eunuchs served as army generals, harem guards and advisors to the emperors. Some even supervised the education of princes. Eunuchs ensured that no unauthorized person entered the seraglio; they were considered ideal for the protection of the harem women due to their inability to reproduce and because they were perceived to be sexually non-threatening. Manucci states that the chief eunuch of the seraglio had several other important duties.

He has a large allowance, has charge of the treasury, is master of the wardrobe, decides on the details and the pattern of Sarapas (robes) to be prepared; in short, it is he who has charge of all the Mughal expenditure of the clothes...and the precious stones, of the jewelry, of everything that goes into or comes out of the palace. (Manucci 1906, 350-1)

Lower ranking eunuchs performed the duties of messenger and watchmen. Though emasculated, they were physically strong and highly valued for their strength, which enabled them to perform physically taxing duties.

Privy to the inner workings of royal households, eunuchs wielded significant influence and often attained high-status both in the court and in society (Gomez 2005, 37). In fact, Islamic history has witnessed a number of renowned imperial eunuchs. For instance, El-Hajj Beshir Agha (ca. 1657-1746), the most powerful chief eunuch in the history of the Ottoman Empire, was known to have shaped and propagated the official Ottoman brand of Sunni Islam (Hathaway 2006). Likewise, some of the greatest nobles in the Mughal Empire were eunuchs.

Imaduddin Rayhan, the chief minister under Sultan Balban, Kafur Hazardinari, the army commander and vice-regent of Alauddin Khalji, and Khurau Shah the favorite of Qutbuddin Mubarak Khalji who rose to be king, were all eunuchs...Under the Mughals many important eunuchs...rose to the position of...commanders of armies and governors...The chief Nazirs or Khwaja Saras generally enjoyed the title of Aitmad Khan or Aitbar Khan (the Trusted Lord). (Lal 1994)

Through their service to royalty, eunuchs also managed to amass large amounts of wealth (Lal 1994). They were entitled to public revenue, received grants in the form of cash and land, and even had the official right to beg (Preston 1987, 372). As a result of the number of high-paying job openings available to eunuchs in the Mughal Empire, it had become common amongst poor families to convert some of their sons into eunuchs and have them work in the palaces to create a steady source of revenue for the family (Beveridge 1909, 150-1). Jahangir abolished castration but the practice persisted because eunuch slaves had become a profitable commercial commodity. In 1668, Aurangzeb also banned the practice throughout the Empire. However, the

custom continued and Jahangir and his successors went on accepting eunuchs as gifts for duties in the harem (Beveridge 1909, 247). Historians speculate that the role of eunuchs as court officials diminished under the collapse of the Mughal rule (Kidwai 1985, 93), and their subsequent criminalization by the British (Pamment 2010, 34). What became of royal eunuchs upon the downfall of the Mughals is uncertain, though khwaja sira oral history suggests that they either went on to establish hijra networks or were integrated into them. What is evident, however, is the vast difference between medieval and contemporary khwaja siras, a disparity that will become obvious in the following chapter.

Colonial accounts of Indian history focus on “eunuchs” and “hijras” who British rulers identified as a criminal caste, a classification under which they could be subjected to surveillance and arrest. Hijras were registered under the Criminal Tribes Acts of 1871, which called for the arrest of individuals involved in kidnapping or castrating children, in committing offences under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, those seen publically dressed like women, and those who danced or played music (Reddy 2005, 27). The British variously viewed hijras as naturally impotent men, those born with congenital malformations, and those who voluntarily mutilated themselves (Reddy 2005, 28).

### Khwaja Siras and Pakistani Laws

A mixture of secular and Islamic laws governs present-day Pakistan. Islamization policies in the country stem from the Objectives Resolution passed in 1949 which forms the basis of Pakistan’s constitution (Haines 2012, 5). This resolution simultaneously promised a Pakistan that would be a democratic state where minority rights would be protected, as well as where Muslims would be able to live in accordance with Islamic injunctions (Rouse 2004, 26). The resolution sowed the



seeds for a struggle, not so much between modernist and religious forces, but one between democratic and anti-democratic ones (Rouse 2004, 28). However, the most drastic changes in the country's legal structure occurred in the 1980s under the rule of General Zia-ul-Haq, who sought to introduce an Islamic system of justice. During his tenure, the government introduced its interpretation of Islamic law (Ahmad 33-4) and created Shariat courts. Although these transformations weakened the secular basis of the state, they did not replace the existing judicial system (Toor 2011). The constitution states that shari'ah may be applied to situations perceived to be in contradiction to the Quran (The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan). However, secular law typically governs citizens and Islam is selectively invoked (Toor 2011). As yet, the Pakistani state remains unclear about the role of Islam in its operation and as a marker of national identity, and the country remains plagued by contradictions and anxieties surrounding Islam and its location within the nationalist framework (Haines 2012, 5-6). In turn, this indeterminacy has consequences for the state's treatment of issues pertaining to gender and sexuality.

Cases involving same-sex sexual behavior, for instance, may be subject to both secular and religious law. Sodomy is illegal under section 377 of the Pakistan Penal Code (Act XLV of 1860), an injunction that was inherited from British colonial rulers. Same-sex sexual behavior, which falls under the code's exegesis of "unnatural offences" and "carnal intercourse against the order of nature," is punishable with a fine and between two to ten years in prison (Pakistan Penal Code). Islamic law, also enforceable in such situations, prescribes corporal punishment of lashes and stoning for same-sex sexual activity (RRT Research Response). However, the laws pertaining to homosexual acts are rarely invoked and arrests and trials hardly ever occur.

Nonetheless, the existence of the injunction makes gendered and sexual minorities vulnerable to blackmail, extortion and sexual exploitation, often at the hands of law enforcement officials.

With 377 intact, the Supreme Court granted rights to khwaja siras in a series of historic rulings starting in June 2009 after decades of no legal recognition and protection. Aslam Khaki, a Supreme Court (SC) advocate and human rights lawyer, filed a court petition in February 2009 following a police raid on a khwaja sira event in Rawalpindi, and a subsequent protest by gender ambiguous people outside the office of the Senior Superintendent of Police (Redding 2014). “[T]he Chief Justice put in a personal interest and effort into this case,” said Khaki. “I didn’t have to do much research or lawyering, [and] he passed order after order on this issue.”

The Court ordered the government to issue national identity cards to khwaja siras indicating their third sex/gender status. Pakistan began recognizing “khwaja sira” as a distinct sex/gender in addition to male and female. Khwaja siras were given the choice of listing their sex/gender on their national identity cards as male (khwaja sira), female (khwaja sira), or khunsā-e-mushkil<sup>13</sup>. While the SC was unclear about how it defined these khwaja sira subcategories, they bore close resemblance to the three Islamic classifications of intersexuality, that is, those who possessed male-like, female-like or indeterminable genitalia. In the subsequent hearings that took place between 2009-2012, the Court ordered the provision of security, inheritance and voting rights, the right to take public office, educational and job opportunities, and access to government sponsored welfare programs for khwaja siras. The respective government departments, in consultation with select khwaja sira leaders, devised many of the policies based on these issues. Moreover, in efforts to “mainstream” khwaja siras, the Chief Justice ordered various departments to integrate gender ambiguous people into their programs.

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<sup>13</sup> As mentioned earlier, khunsā-e-mushkil refers to intersexual people whose genitals are not suitable indicators of sex.

Subsequently, a number of government units attempted to involve khwaja siras in their work (e.g., the World Food Program proposed to train khwaja siras to educate women about disease prevention and nutrition). However, enrollment in these government programs among khwaja siras, particularly registration for new identity cards, remained deplorably low (I discuss this problem at length in chapter 9).

Though unexpected, the Pakistani state's action coincided with similar developments in other parts of South Asia. India allowed "transgender" citizens to register for passports in 2005, added an "O" for Other sex/gender category to the country's voter registration process in 2009 (Van Hollen 2013, 44), included transgender people to the country's census and citizen identification system in 2011, and recognized hijras/transgender people as a third gender in 2014; Nepal created a third gender category in 2007 and included transgender people in its census in 2011; and Bangladesh allowed hijras to register to vote in 2008 (Bochenek and Knight) and created a distinct third gender category in 2013. To date, only seven countries in the world legally recognize non-binary sexes/genders, four of which happen to be the aforementioned South Asian nation-states. Germany, New Zealand and Australia are the other three countries that accept third sex/gender categories other than male and female (Pasquesoone 2014). In the US, several states prohibit discrimination based on gender identity, but the US government has a binary gender system that does not allow for additional classifications on legal documents (Pasquesoone 2014).

Even though khwaja siras were granted rights and privileges, a number of aspects of their lives continued to be criminalized. For instance, Pakistani laws related to marriage infer that it is a union between a man and a woman, making marriages between individuals of the same-sex and those involving gender ambiguous people illegal by implication. In 2006, in a case involving a

woman, Shahzina, and her transsexual partner, Shamail<sup>14</sup>, the Supreme Court upheld the rights of the couple to live together without entering into a marriage (Toor 2011) when the former's family charged the latter with abduction. However, the two could not be tried under 377 since the code applies specifically to penetrative sexual acts<sup>15</sup> (Toor 2011). In 2010, a gender ambiguous person and a man were arrested in Peshawar on charges of attempted marriage. Though the couple denied the charges, the police, who raided the event and arrested 40 or so guests, claimed otherwise. The police declared the event to be against shariáh and accused the couple of “unnatural sexual offence” (Eunuch Wedding Raided in Pakistan). The court initially had the accused incarcerated but eventually acquitted them because the prosecution failed to prove the charges against the couple (Amin, “Court Acquits Man, Eunuch in Marriage Case”). The defendants would have been imprisoned under section 377 had the plaintiff managed to provide substantial evidence. Hence, even though non-heteronormative marriages were not legally recognized, the courts either granted couples the right to cohabit, or exonerated them in the absence of proof demonstrating their violation of the penal code.

In addition, section 371 of the aforementioned code pronounces sex work illegal and liable to a fine and imprisonment of up to twenty-five years (Pakistan Penal Code). Under section 294, the performance and singing of obscene acts and songs in public places is illegal and punishable with imprisonment of up to three months and/or a fine (Pakistan Penal Code). This ruling applied to khwaja siras since most danced for a living, and their performances oftentimes involved sexually suggestive lyrics and gestures. These charges have been raised against khwaja

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<sup>14</sup> Shamail had undergone a mastectomy and hysterectomy (Toor 2011).

<sup>15</sup> Although this foundational case centered on gender ambiguity and preceded the SC ruling on khwaja siras by several years, it did not pave the way for the latter. The historical trajectory of the khwaja sira case is rooted in a specific event (i.e., a police raid that took place at a khwaja sira's party in Rawalpindi), which motivated Aslam Khaki to file a petition in the SC on behalf of gender ambiguous people.

siras in several documented cases, including the “Eunuch Wedding” case mentioned above. Further, begging is illegal in Pakistan according to the West Pakistan Vagrancy Ordinance, 1958, which makes khwaja siras, many of whom beg for a living, vulnerable to arrest and police harassment.

Another key issue pertinent to gender ambiguous people that the Supreme Court did not address in its rulings was sex change. Although sex-change operations are not illegal in Pakistan given the absence of secular laws prohibiting such procedures, it is believed to be against Shariah, and in 2013, was deemed un-Islamic by the Council of Islamic Ideology (CII), a constitutional body responsible for giving legal advice on religious matters to the Pakistani Government. However, those seeking to undergo sex-reassignment surgery may seek court permission under certain circumstances. Pakistani courts have in a few documented cases authorized the procedure as treatment for gender dysphoria, that is, the condition in which persons experience a mismatch between their biological sex and their gender identity. In order to be granted permission, petitioners have had to undergo extensive counseling prior to surgery, and make a strong case, endorsed by medical professionals, in favor of the operation<sup>16</sup>.

In 2008, a woman in Islamabad was granted court permission for sex-reassignment to become a man (Thaindian News), and in 2010 a man from Rawalpindi was approved for the same to become a woman (NDTV). In both cases, doctors diagnosed the patients with “gender identity disorder” (GID), but refused to perform the procedure until the patients received court approval. Importantly, these court orders are not a legal requirement and some doctors perform SRS without them. To date, no policies have been instituted to regulate sex change surgeries and

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<sup>16</sup> Importantly, most khwaja siras were unaware of the option of acquiring a court approval for sex change, and the few who were privy to it were unclear about the exact process. Moreover, despite the increasing popularity of corporeal modifications, many khwaja siras did not have the resources to undergo expensive surgery let alone make a case for sex change in court.

the subsequent change of sex on identification documents, even though models for the provision of SRS exist in some Muslim countries, including Iran and Turkey.

### Transsexuality in Iran

While medieval jurists recognized gender ambiguity, they were fixated on developing laws pertaining to genital irregularities and did not advance a concept of gender identity (Kugle 2010, 256). This emphasis on anatomy is prevalent in most Islamic republics and majority Muslim countries and is evident in their silence or condemnation of sex reassignment. In Malaysia, SRS is not illegal but a person's sex change is not officially recognized, which means that those who undergo such surgeries have to retain their birth-assigned sex on identification documents (APCOM; Haneef 2011, 105). In Egypt, for instance, sex-realignment is obligatory in the case of genital ambiguity, but forbidden for males and females who claim to feel trapped in the wrong body (Kugle 2010, 261). Egyptian religious authorities believe that those without physiological ambiguities wishing to change their birth sex are merely given to whim and lust (Kugle 2010, 261). Hence, laws in most Muslim countries are dominated by an intersex model of ambiguity that fails to address the needs of those who experience gender variance.

However, in the contemporary period, Muslim jurists, faced with scientific evidence of the psychological reality behind gender and the availability of sex-reassignment technology, have had to confront the issue of gender identity. Turkey, for instance, legalized sex-reassignment surgery as a treatment for gender dysphoria in 1988 (Yuksel et al., 2000; Kurtoglu 2009). Indonesia too permits SRS and a subsequent change of sex on legal documents (APCOM). Importantly though, SRS is legal in Turkey and Indonesia under civil law but not on religious grounds. A notable exception is the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Ayatollah Khomeini issued a

*Fatvā* (an Islamic injunction) in 1983 that legalized sex change surgeries for individuals experiencing gender dysphoria. Iran views the condition as a physical illness for which it prescribes surgery. The procedure can only be performed after a patient is diagnosed with “GID” by a panel of three physicians and a permit is obtained (Bucar 2010, 607). The government covers up to half the cost of surgery for trans-men and -women in need of financial assistance. Upon the completion of the procedure, an individual can apply for new identification documents (e.g., birth certificate, driver’s license, national ID card) reflecting their “true sex” (Bucar 2010, 607).

Sex-reassignment is sanctioned by Iranian Shia clerics based on an interpretation of shariáh that views the practice as essential in revealing a person’s true gender (Bucar 2010, 602).

Khomeini expressed these ideas in his book on legal opinions.

If knowledge proves, before the operation, that inside he is the opposite sex, and therefore the operation does not change one sex for the other, but rather uncovers what was hidden, then there is no doubt concerning the necessity of putting into proper order the true sex and getting rid of the traces of the visual sex. (Khomeini 2000, 596-7)

In effect, sex change uncovers a person’s true hidden sex rather than constructing a new one. In such cases, a sex change is necessary for those whose physical bodies do not match their internal gender in order to ensure that they abide by their appropriate moral duties.

In contrast, voluntarily altering the God-given body, which is considered tampering with the socio-sexual role designated by God, is unacceptable according to dominant Sunni Islam (Haneef 2011, 102). Alternatively, Shia clerics argue that sex-reassignment is not tantamount to interfering with nature because a gender ambiguous individual’s “psychic-pathological condition” is itself a biological given, a kind of innate birth “defect” (Haneef 2011, 103). And just the way surgical modifications are permissible for those with genital irregularities, SRS is approved for those with psycho-somatic incongruities since both are natural conditions.

Bucar's analysis of the Islamic ethics of sex change in Iran suggests that for Shia clerics internal gender can be ontologically prior to external sex (2010, 610). In contrast, the Sunni perspective, dominant in Pakistan, appears to prioritize physical sex upon which gender roles are imposed. This arrangement presumes that body markings cannot contradict the truth about a person. In the Sunni system, the notion of an internal gender does not seem to exist. Moreover, physical sex seems to gain its importance partly from its procreative potential, whereas sex change terminates one's ability to reproduce. If Sunni Islam understands reproduction as a primary function of sex, then tampering with it inevitably becomes a moral issue.

Iran and Pakistan present two contrasting though imbricated Islamic and legal points of view regarding sex change, as a consequence of which the procedure is permissible in the former but unrecognized in the latter. Evidently, this divergence in interpretation is rooted in the differing positions of Shia and Sunni Islam. Despite the differences, however, there is some overlap between the two countries in that Pakistan offers the option of sex change in special circumstances, and the route whereby court permission for the procedure is granted resembles the Iranian process. Nonetheless, the consequence of the legal disparity between the two Islamic republics is that it has made Iran one of the sex change capitals of the world, while in Pakistan legally sanctioned sex-reassignment surgeries (SRS) are not only rare but the fact that a legal option even exists is general unknown to citizens. Yet, these constraints do not prevent underground sex change and physical emasculation surgeries from taking place in Pakistan.

On a cautionary note, the legalization of SRS may be as limiting as it is enabling. SRS can be perceived as a modern-day remedy to and outlet for the sexual needs of gender ambiguous individuals. The proponents of SRS see it as a solution that not only helps to maintain the Islamic ordering of people as male and female, but also enables genderqueer people to abide by the



moral duties of the category to which they correctly belong. Indeed, some proponents of sex-reassignment view the procedure as a way of preventing gender variant (i.e., mukhannath-like) people from resorting to the “vice” of sodomy by creating for them the option of vaginal intercourse, and thereby also eradicating homosexuality from society (Haneef 2011, 105). While these laws have created a new avenue for gender ambiguous Muslims and have made certain Islamic countries appear “progressive,” critics have noted that they reinforce patriarchy and normative gender dichotomies that limit gender ambiguous people to sex-reassignment, enforce a strict adherence to binary gender by brute force, and exclude, marginalize and even criminalize those who do not wish to take the surgical route.

### **On Being a Khwaja Sira in Pakistan: A Brief Overview**

The 2009 judicial decision to grant rights to khwaja siras was hailed by civil society groups as a crucial step to rehabilitate gender ambiguous people. Their legal recognition created a public discourse around khwaja sira rights in Pakistan and provided certain protections to khwaja siras, particularly with respect to their treatment by law enforcement personnel.

In light of these recent activities, I arrived in Karachi for fieldwork expecting a greater public receptiveness towards khwaja siras in the wake of the Supreme Court’s decision. I was not anticipating radical change since the transformation of social norms is always a protracted process. However, my sense of optimism deflated even before I stepped into the discursive space we call the field. My first sense of the prevailing social attitudes towards khwaja siras came from my own parent’s initial discomfort with my research topic. The difficulties that gender ambiguous people faced in everyday life will not be new to many audiences. In fact, these recurring points will read like tropes of the South Asian queer experience. Yet, I summarize

them here at the risk of my own complicity in perpetuating stale images if for no other reason than to convey some of the key afflictions of research participants.

Khwaja siras were among the most stigmatized and marginalized citizens in contemporary Pakistan. They were viewed with ambivalence not only due to their ambiguous physical features but also because they were believed to possess the power to bless and curse. They simultaneously invoked a sense of sympathy, curiosity, fear and disgust among the general public, and their non-normativity led to their exclusion from mainstream society. Faced with ridicule and violence from family and friends, many left their homes at an early age to find refuge among other gender ambiguous people.

Khwaja siras have a centuries-old system of social organization through which they forge alliances with one another. This social structure is based on the master-disciple (guru-celā) relationship in which a mentor takes on a student through ritual initiation. By forging relationships, gender ambiguous people were enmeshed in a vast network consisting of households, classes, and lineages.

Khwaja siras were generally from lower class backgrounds, though a small number of individuals from lower middle class families had also joined khwaja siras communities. Most khwaja siras received very little formal education, and employers were typically unwilling to hire them due to their gender differences. A large number of khwaja siras dressed in women's attire, and those who did not were unable to mask their effeminacy. The few who managed to find employment emphasized the difficulty in retaining jobs on account of routine harassment from coworkers. Consequently, most earned a living through begging, singing and dancing, and blessing newborns and newly married couples. The majority of khwaja siras also engaged in sex work, which increased their susceptibility to sexually transmitted diseases.

Moreover, their inferior social status made them vulnerable to physical violence and to emotional and sexual abuse. Khwaja siras were routinely harassed by a variety of people including law enforcement personnel, though police harassment had declined substantially since the 2009 Supreme Court order. The illegality of and/or religious prohibitions against sex work, sex-reassignment, non-normative marriage, and “obscene” acts and songs put khwaja siras at risk of legal action as well as blackmail and extortion.

While the judicial move to grant civil liberties to khwaja siras was momentous in its own right, it did little to positively impact various facets of the lives of ordinary khwaja siras who continued to face cultural and structural violence. The mixed public perception towards them necessitated that they played games of secrecy and deception with ordinary people as a means of assuaging daily suffering. The gaping void between legal and social change was partly filled by khwaja sira organizations and NGOs that were involved in the rights activism and the social development of gender ambiguous minorities.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has described religious, historical and legal information pertaining to sex, gender and ambiguity. The following chapters will elucidate that the ideas presented herein both overlapped with and diverged from popular understandings of sex/gender variance in Pakistan. For instance, the khwaja siras of the medieval period, though vaguely similar, were not the same as those who had appropriated the term in contemporary Pakistan. It will become clear that khwaja sira identity politics took a lead from localized religious and cultural beliefs that, although diverse, provided either a parochial or an ambivalent outlook on non-normative genders and sexualities.

**PART TWO:**  
**Culture and Subjectivity**

### **Chapter 3: The Khwaja Sira Universe**

Akin to use of the word “line” among queer individuals in Kolkata, India (Boyce 2007, 407), khwaja siras used the English term “field” to describe their social world and line of work. The field was a porous space that characterized the realm of khwaja siras, an unbounded domain that could be entered into and exited, where gender ambiguous people could be themselves, and where they could forge social ties with other khwaja siras. It was a support system that catered to their material and emotional needs, provided safe communal spaces, and livelihood opportunities. The field, then, referred to the khwaja sira sociocultural system, which was peripheral and juxtaposed to the dominant cultural system from which gender ambiguous people were largely excluded. Like any cultural system, the field was a construction that influenced and organized the behavior and self-conceptions of khwaja siras. It shaped the identities of those within it, and despite its appearance of unity, these identities were diverse and complex. In this chapter, I discuss key features of the field, including the multiple identities that formed its core, the gendered and sexual desires and practices of gender ambiguous people, and the khwaja sira social structure. I describe the structuring of identities and behaviors from the point of view of gender ambiguous people, which, I demonstrate in later chapters, diverged from mainstream understandings of “khwaja sira.”

Much of content of this chapter reiterates material discussed in anthropological studies of hijras in India (Nanda 1990; Reddy 2005). However, it also diverges from these investigations by bringing into sharp focus the lives of gender ambiguous people in Pakistan who have previously not been the subjects of long-term ethnographic research. In addition to regional variations, this chapter highlights the emergence and understandings of new identity categories that are products of sociocultural, religious and legal transformations that are unique to Pakistan. It also highlights

key identity markers (i.e., *hijarpan*) and cultural practices (i.e., performances associated with *hijarpan*, certain wedding rituals) that do not appear in earlier studies.

### ***Rūh*: The Soul Within**

Gender ambiguous people attributed their gender difference to their soul (*rūh*), which they believed was feminine relative to their bodies. In other words, they experienced incongruity between sex/body and gender identity. In some sense this is similar to the diagnosis developed by psychologists and physicians for transgender people in Euro-American contexts<sup>17</sup>. But I do not emphasize this too much since khwaja siras generally did not view their feminine soul as a pathological condition. They did, however, appropriate a vocabulary that expressed their condition in terms of internal feelings and desires, regardless of physical traits. “Being a khwaja sira has to do with your soul, about how you feel from within,” said Mano. “It does not matter whether or not you have a penis.”

Khwaja siras believed that their soul instilled in them feminine desires, and drove them to be feminine in gender role and embodiment. Importantly, khwaja siras asserted that they were not women and that they could never be women. “If someone calls us women, momentarily we’ll be happy, but we’re not women,” said Payal. “If someone calls us men, we get irritated. Our personalities are that of khwaja siras.” The incongruence between soul and body rendered them “neither men nor women” (Nanda 1999, 23) but khwaja sira. However, some gender variant youth from lower-middle class backgrounds viewed themselves as women and rejected this indigenous gender cartography.

Interlocutors recalled experiencing the influence of the soul from an early age. “Growing

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<sup>17</sup> Formerly known as gender identity disorder (GID), gender dysphoria refers to a person’s state of discontent with the sex assigned to them at birth and the gender roles associated with it.

up, I was very feminine,” said Shani. “I would sometimes pick up my mother’s nail polish and scarf when no one would be at home,” said Shani. “I would hang out with girls, sing and dance, get our dolls married. I never liked cricket or boys’ games.” Likewise, others described an interest in domestic work, such as cooking and cleaning, and some enjoyed observing and mimicking khwaja siras. Highlighting the prevalence of khwaja siras in the public social landscape, Naima claimed that she “would follow khwaja siras around [in her childhood]... and strut like them.”

Gender ambiguous people generally believed their soul to be innate and God-given. Nargis highlighted the enduring attachment of the soul to the living body. “This soul will only leave me when I die. It cannot leave me while I’m still alive.” This statement was meant to suggest that God’s will could not be negated by human intervention.

The khwaja sira understanding of the soul corresponds with the Islamic concept of soul or self. According to Murata and Chittick (1994), scholars of Islamic law and philosophy (respectively), the soul is believed to be positioned half-way between the spirit, which is made of light, and the body, which is made of clay (94-101). The soul is an ambiguous reality (218-9) since it embodies both the qualities of the spirit (i.e., life, knowledge, desire and power) and of the body (i.e., darkness, ignorance and death) (100-1). The soul is constantly evolving and limitless in that it can acquire any combination of the qualities of the spirit or the body over the course of a person’s life, thus having important consequences for human becoming (103). On the Day of Judgment or reckoning, the soul passes either into the heavens as a reward or into hell as punishment depending upon its degree of actualization during life in this world (231). Hence, the Islamic understanding of soul could have important implications for gender variance; as an

ambiguous phenomenon it can develop in divergence from the qualities of the body, including its biological limitations, thus, producing non-binary genders.

## **Identities**

The identities that subsisted within the khwaja sira structure both overlapped with and contradicted the dominant perceptions about khwaja siras. Importantly, khwaja sira was not as monolithic a category as it was often portrayed to be, and there was a lack of consensus among gender ambiguous people about who should be included within the khwaja sira framework. In other words, the constitution of identities within the khwaja sira universe fluctuated depending on who one asked, who did the asking, and in what context. I describe the khwaja sira identity structure while highlighting the dissenting voices within the field.

## Khwaja Sira

Khwaja sira was a highly contested and often confusing term. It was a historic word from the Mughal era, one that was conferred as a title of honor upon the eunuchs who served in the royal courts. The term lost currency when khwaja siras lost their imperial functions upon the downfall of the Mughal Empire, but it reemerged in the first decade of the new millennium, owing partly to the efforts of khwaja sira activists and to the Supreme Court rulings in favor of gender ambiguous people. Many favored “khwaja sira” not only as a term denoting respect but also as one that was devoid of the negative connotations entailed by words like hijra<sup>18</sup>, *khusrah*<sup>19</sup>, and

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<sup>18</sup> Puri notes similar changes in parts of India where the derogatory use of hijra has led to the circulation of regional terms, such as *aravani* in South India and *kinnar* in North India (Puri 2010, 40).

<sup>19</sup> The Punjabi word for hijra, *khusra*, was commonly used by Urdu speakers as a substitute for hijra in everyday speech.



*khadra*<sup>20</sup>. Respondents admitted to hearing the term either through televised khwaja sira media advocacy, or through their personal connections with activist leaders. While most were familiar with the term, a few informants did not fully understand it or admitted to never having heard it.

Despite its relative newness, many informants had appropriated khwaja sira even though they disagreed over its precise meaning. To some, khwaja sira meant as intersexual person or someone with congenital ambiguities. However, to most others it described an individual who possessed a feminine soul regardless of corporeality. Hence, khwaja sira was generally understood as an umbrella construct consisting of several distinct yet imbricated identities. Although there was no firm consensus about who should be enumerated under the broad khwaja sira category, gender ambiguous people typically acknowledged that *khunsa*, *zennana* and hijra were the three main khwaja sira subcategories, followed by several other terminological and linguistic varieties that I discuss in the following sections. What united these categories was the feminine soul, which all khwaja siras claimed to possess.

### Khunsa

Khunsa referred to those who were intersex, that is, someone born with a mixture of both male and female hormonal/chromosomal and/or genital features. However, intersexual khwaja siras were few in number and they rarely if ever join khwaja sira social networks. Indeed, I did not meet a single intersexual khwaja sira during fieldwork. Even though a number of informants initially claimed to be khunsa, I typically discovered their true corporeal status through their khwaja sira family and friends. Further, many informants admitted that they knew of no intersexuals who had been inducted into the khwaja sira cultural system. “I have come across

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<sup>20</sup> Someone who is impotent or sterile.

many khwaja siras in my life, but up till now I have not seen a khwaja sira that society talks about,” said Deeba. “I mean, I have not met someone who is a khwaja sira by birth.” Deeba addresses the popular social belief that khwaja siras were hermaphrodites. Similarly, Naima likened them to an extinct species. “The khwaja siras of old times are no more to be found. They are extinct like that animal...what was it? I saw it on TV. (Dinosaur?). Yes, they are gone like them.” Naima believed that the myth of intersexuality was a relic of the khwaja sira communities of the past. Moreover, Moti asserted that the dominant belief that khwaja siras either forcibly procured hermaphroditic children or that parents gave away such children to gender ambiguous people was either untrue or no longer practiced.

The only individual who claimed that she personally knew of a few intersexuals who had joined khwaja sira networks was my trusted assistant, Nadia.

There is a by-birth khwaja sira in my village and his penis is the size of a grain of rice and his testicles are as small as lentil grains. He is completely hairless. My mother is a mid-wife in our village. She told me that she once helped deliver a by-birth khwaja sira. The following day when she went to inquire about the health of the child, he had died. Perhaps the members of the household strangled him. Once I saw a khunsa in my village who had joined khwaja siras, but I don’t think he had a feminine soul. He was wearing women’s clothes but he was walking like a man. Even his voice was heavy. I have heard of three khunsas who have become celās of hijras. Also, in my village there is a woman who does not menstruate and she does not have breasts, but she has a vagina. There are many cases like this but we never see them because they stay with their families.

Nadia highlights several factors contributing to the invisibility of intersexual people. First, she suggests a potentially a high rate of infanticide of intersexual newborns. Second, khunsas most likely had little motivation to join the field since they lacked a feminine soul. Third, intersexual women were barely visible since they lacked the mobility enjoyed by intersexual men.

Zennana

The majority of the khwaja sira population consisted of zennanas. The state of possessing a feminine soul and male sexual organs was called *akvā* in Farsi vernacular, and the identity term attached to this condition was *zennana*. Hence, a zennana was someone who was born physically male, that is, with male sexual organs, but was believed to have a feminine soul and traits<sup>21</sup>.

Zennanas situationally adopted either the sartorial appearance of men or women; they either wore men's clothes (*khotki*), kept short hair, and sported beards and mustaches, or they dressed in women's clothes (*firqā*), wore makeup, and grew out their hair or used wigs. However, zennanas were unable to conceal their femininity even when they were dressed as men. I met Soni during my second month into fieldwork. Payal and I were waiting for her outside a busy intersection when a man pulled up on a motorcycle. He was dressed in jeans, a blue t-shirt and a baseball hat. "She's here!" said Payal, waving at the man on the motorcycle. "That's Soni?" I asked in amazement. It was not until Soni got off her motorcycle and walked over to shake my hand that I noticed her feminine gait. Later at her house, Soni removed her hat and bared her long locks of hair. I learned that she typically dressed in men's clothes and adopted a feminine appearance only for khwaja sira parties and dance events.

Zennanas transitioned back and forth between looking and behaving like men and khwaja siras due to both personal desire and familial pressure. Their fluid and situated identities allowed them to manage the split between their familial and khwaja sira lives. Some zennanas dressed up as khwaja siras occasionally while others almost full-time. Among those who adopted a semi-permanent khwaja sira persona were migrant zennanas who lived and worked in Karachi, and transformed into men only during home-visits to their natal villages. Most migrant khwaja siras were married to women and had children. In Karachi, these zennanas had the freedom to live like

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<sup>21</sup> Some zennanas retained male genitals but feminized their bodies through breasts implants and/or hormone treatment.

khwaja siras given the sheer distance between Karachi and their distant hometowns and the unlikelihood of their familial and khwaja sira worlds colliding. A very small number of zennanas lived permanently like khwaja siras, particularly those who managed to avoid the pressure of heteronormative marriage. For instance, Noor's family did not coerce her into marriage since her ties with them were weak. Such zennanas avoided emasculation, which they believed was forbidden in Islam.

In contrast, *khoṭkī* zennanas, that is, those who spent most of their time in men's clothes, and adopt a khwaja sira appearance only when visiting other khwaja siras or when attending khwaja sira cultural events, tended to live in their familial homes. The diversity among *khoṭkī* zennanas became clear to me when I spent a day at Hajra's house. Her students demonstrate that familial ties and livelihood practices influenced the embodied practices of *khoṭkī* zennanas. Nadia and I had spent the afternoon at Hajra's house, and by evening her disciples began to drop in for a visit. Gul and Khan were the first to arrive. Both were effeminate but dressed in men's clothes since they lived with their biological kin. Gul wore men's *shalvār qamīz*, his face was bearded, and his hair was henna-dyed orange. Khan wore a t-shirt and pants, and sported a trimmed mustache. Gul and Khan immediately busied themselves with dinner preparations in the kitchen. Next, Hajra's grand-celā (i.e., her disciple's student), Mina, walked in. She had shoulder length hair and wore a short *kurti* with jeans. I learned that Mina was a married khwaja sira who lived with her extended family. She worked as a peon at a commercial office building where she dressed in men's uniform during work hours. The only time Mina was able to express herself as a khwaja sira was during visits to her grand guru's house. Then Hajra's celā, Chini, arrived after a hectic day of begging the streets. She wore makeup and women's clothes, but later in the evening, she removed her makeup and changed into a men's button down shirt and jeans because

she was headed back to her parental home where she lived with her aging father. I learned that Chini came to her guru's house everyday to change her "getup" before and after her daily begging routine.

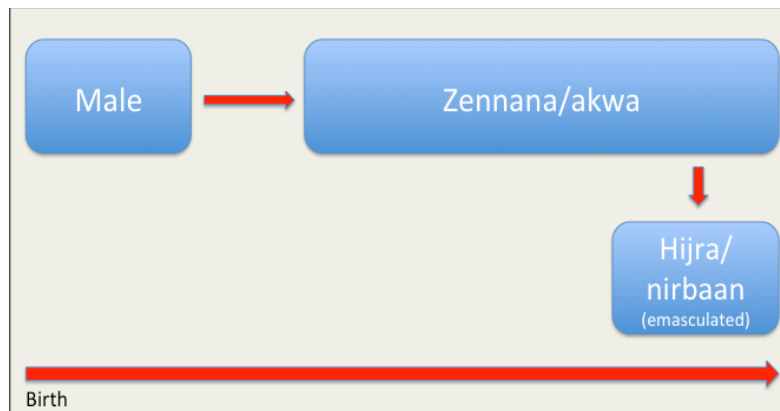
Khoṭkī zennanas found it harder to manage the split between their khwaja sira and male personas since the boundary between the social worlds they inhabited was imbricated and perforated. For instance, my routine presence was initially disconcerting for some khoṭkī zennanas in Payal's extended family. Despite my assurances to the contrary, they were convinced that I was affiliated with a local news channel, and were afraid of being exposed on television. The sight of my camera made them nervous and they dared not speak to me. By our fourth meeting, however, some felt slightly comfortable in my presence. Tina admitted her fear of being ridiculed by neighbors and relatives if her photos were leaked to the press. Social stigma necessitated khoṭkī zennanas to successfully manage a dual identity in order to maintain familial respect and to avoid persecution.

### Hijra

The state of having undergone genital excision, which involved the removal of both the penis and testicles, was called *nirbān* in Farsi, and the identity term attached to this physical condition was *hijra*. The identity of an individual changed from zennana to hijra after the removal of the genitals. Emasculation was desirable not only because it enhanced femininity but also it improved one's status among khwaja siras. In spite of this, a relatively small number of zennanas choose to get an operation since it was believed to be prohibited in Islam. Hijras dressed in women's clothes almost fulltime and permanently grew out their hair.

What unified zennanas and hijras was their defining characteristic, the feminine soul or

rūh, which all khwaja siras were believed to possess from the time of birth. Zennanas and hijras mostly employed feminine pronouns for themselves and for other khwaja siras in everyday speech. Like zennanas, hijras had their own social networks that were open for admission to both those who were and were not emasculated. Even though the formal definition of hijra hinged on becoming nirbān, colloquially, zennanas who were initiated into hijra networks and dressed mostly in women's attire were also called hijras.



**Figure 2.** The above diagram illustrates that like zennanas, all hijras were genitally male at birth, and they necessarily went through the zennana/akvā phase prior to surgical emasculation. Hence, hijra/nirbān was an offshoot of the zennana category. Although a relatively small number of zennanas became hijras through emasculation, many were considered hijras by way of induction into hijra households.

Referring to a hijra as a transsexual woman—perhaps its closest English language equivalent in Euro-American contexts—is misleading because it captures neither the sociocultural nor the corporeal disparities between hijras and those who identify as transsexual in the United States. For instance, a transsexual woman is someone who has undergone sex reassignment to align her male sex/body with her gender identity. This process involves hormone treatment, breast implants, vaginoplasty and counseling. In contrast, hijras underwent a culturally prescribed and ritually mediated emasculation operation that involved the excision of the penis and testicles (i.e., nirbān) but not the construction of a vagina. Those who surgically acquired

vaginas were perceived as women (*nehāro*), and by definition, could not belong to the hijra classificatory regime.

### Murat

In Farsi, *murat* generally referred to young individuals who were relatively new to the field or to khwaja siras who were physically attractive. Incidentally, *murat* is also an Urdu word meaning statue or image. This secondary meaning was pertinent to the lived reality of khwaja siras since they appropriated the feminine image or persona in everyday life. Most *murats* were non-emasculated since every young newcomer who joined the khwaja sira social system necessarily went through the *zennana/akvā* phase for many years before she could even consider becoming a hijra/nirbān<sup>22</sup>. However, there were a few exceptions since some *murats* became emasculated early on in their careers as khwaja siras. The term *murat* became less applicable to khwaja siras as they aged. In everyday speech, *murat* was an extensively used term that could be used to identify a variety of gender ambiguous people since it traversed corporeal boundaries and communal affiliation.

### Transgender and Shemale

Between 2011-13, the term “transgender” had gained currency among a small group of activist and lower middle-class gender variant Karachiites. Access to an English language education, to the Internet, and to NGOs provided these individuals the resources that enabled a self-identification with the transgender category. Those who identified as transgender were from

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<sup>22</sup> Farah explained the logic behind the term by breaking it into syllables: “The ‘m’ in *murat* comes from *mard* (man), and the remaining letters, ‘urat’ come from ‘aorat (woman). That’s 25% man, and 75% woman.” Farah’s explanation of *murat* was cogent even though she was the only individual who explained the term phonetically.

middle-class homes, they dressed in both Western and Pakistani attire, and many lived with other gender ambiguous people in flats located in nicer neighborhoods instead of shantytowns where most khwaja siras lived. Most were sex workers who catered to a middle-class and partially Internet-based clientele. Despite their differences, the transgender-identifying individuals I knew had been inducted into the guru-celā system.

In addition, they were socially connected to lower-middle class “gay” men. During adolescence, before she knew she was “transgender,” Sarah heard the term gay through Internet chatrooms and pornography, which led her to misidentify as gay.

At that time, I knew what gay meant, but I thought that hijra was something else. I knew that I wasn’t gay, but I started calling myself gay because that was the only thing I found that I could relate to. I was comfortable calling myself gay because gays are more literate, so I got along with them.

Conversely, she resisted the hijra identity category since it denoted not only an inferior class status but was also laden with social stigma. Others believed that hijras were hermaphrodites. Owing to these factors, the identities of these individuals were initially shaped by their experiences within gay social circles. However, through the gay network they discovered others who like them experienced gender dysphoria. When khwaja sira activism picked up in 2009, a host of other identity labels became available to genderqueer Pakistanis. Activists, NGOs, media outlets and government departments began using a variety of English terms, such as transgender, TG, transsexual, eunuch and shemale alongside with a host of local words. “Transgender” resonated with these formerly gay-identifying individuals, who used their English language and Internet skills to grasp the meaning of these unfamiliar words to better classify themselves as “women” trapped in male bodies. In contrast, gender ambiguous people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds did not consider themselves women, and instead asserted a khwaja sira identity that was distinct from the two normative genders. Although they were generally not



fond of the identity label, khwaja sira, transgender people appropriated it when convenient and beneficial.

“Shemale” was even more popular among a much broader cross-section of khwaja siras in Karachi. Unlike transgender, it resonated with and was more easily articulated by gender ambiguous people from lower-class backgrounds even if they did not have access to the English language. The two-syllable term consisting of the basic English words “she” and “male” was comprehensible to a wider cross-section of khwaja siras for whom transgender was both difficult to pronounce and understand. “Shemale” gained popularity when Noor Vicky, a khwaja sira activist who had gained celebrity status and frequently appeared on television, named her organization “Shemale Coalition of Pakistan” and promoted the term through her media advocacy. Henceforth, gender ambiguous people across the country appropriated shemale as a synonym for khwaja sira. Unlike the United States, where many consider it to be a transphobic slur, the term “shemale” was not regarded as slanderous in the Pakistani context.

### Zānkhā

Some zennana-identified individuals who joined khwaja sira networks were homosexual men (*zānkhā*, *bānṭhā* and in Farsi, *guptī*). These individuals were sexually attracted to other men but were less feminine and more comfortable in men’s clothes, and they rarely if ever cross-dressed. Sarmad, for instance, dressed in men’s shalvār qamīz and was mildly effeminate. He admitted to dressing in women’s clothes just twice since his initiation into a zennana family almost a decade ago. Sarmad was attracted to men and only enjoyed being penetrated even though many zānkhās were sexually versatile. He had maintained several long-term relationships and occasionally engaged in sex-work. Similarly, Guru Basheer was only slightly effeminate and dressed

exclusively in men's shalvār qamīz. He had no desire to wear women's clothes and the only makeup he wore was light foundation and kohl. Both Sarmad and Guru Basheer wished to be addressed with masculine pronouns and by their birth names. Both demonstrated either an absence of or having a very weak feminine soul. Their gendered/sexual desires and behavior suggest a greater correlation with homosexuality than gender ambiguity. Had these individuals been born into upper or middle class families, they would in all likelihood, have identified as gay. Many, though not all, lower-class homosexual men joined khwaja sira households due to the widespread invisibility of alternative queer scripts in South Asian cultures.

### Other Queer Categories

In addition to zānkhās, another queer group with whom khwaja siras had social relationships were lower-middle class *gay* men. Much like gay men in the United States, the identity of these gay individuals was premised on a sexual attraction for men, where they were either the penetrating or penetrated partner or sexually versatile. However, their subjective experiences diverged from Euro-American gay identities since they were shaped by a number of local influences, including the powerful and pervasive khwaja sira culture. Most discovered through the Internet not only the word “gay” but also an underground network of parties, hangouts and hookups. Some entered into long-term relationships with men, while others engaged in sex with multiple partners. Those of marriageable age were married to women, but continued to engage in extra-marital sex with men.

Despite their identity and class differences from khwaja siras, the desires and experiences of these gay men overlapped with certain khwaja sira practices. For instance, I knew numerous gay men who had learned Farsi and the distinctive hijra clap from their khwaja sira contacts,

which they employed in interactions with their gay and gender variant friends. Some appropriated the term *murat* to refer to the effeminate and/or passive partner in a same-sex relationship. Though not a strict rule, sexual pairing among lower middle class gay men often occurred along gendered lines, where masculine gay men tended to have sex with both gender ambiguous and effeminate gay individuals. Feminine gay men occasionally enjoyed cross-dressing, and it was not uncommon to see them dressed in women's clothes at *khwaja sira* and gay parties. Those who were sex workers wore light makeup to attract potential street clients.

Others had been inducted into *hijra* and *zennana* networks. Typically, a gay person's mutual interests with *khwaja siras* led to his initiation into a *khwaja sira* household. These included the desire to occasionally cross-dress and be involved in sex work, especially since *gurus* can provide the resources for both activities (i.e., feminine attire and safe sexual space). In addition, *gurus* provided refuge to gay men ensnared in familial rifts. Gay initiates were also permitted to attend and perform at *khwaja siras* parties where they could safely express their femininity. These men situationally asserted either a *khwaja sira* or a gay identity depending on which category was contextually safer, beneficial or convenient. For many, entry into *khwaja sira* circles was gained through their transgender-identifying friends who belonged to the same class background as them but were members of *khwaja sira* networks<sup>23</sup>. Some gay boys were masculine before they started mingling with gender ambiguous people, but later discovered through their interactions with *khwaja siras* that they had suppressed feminine desires. The gendered and sexual preferences and practices of these gay men demonstrate that their identities cannot be divided sharply "between Western and non-Western experiences of sexuality" (Altman

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<sup>23</sup> As mentioned earlier, many of these transgender individuals formerly identified as 'gay'. Conversely, many homosexual men misidentified as *zennana* and *hijra* and entered *khwaja sira* networks only to later realize that they were not *khwaja siras*. Class affiliation and lack of exposure to alternative queer scripts led many queer Pakistanis to wrongly self-classify.

1996, 91) or “traditional” and “modern” categorizations (Reddy 2004, 163). Such dichotomies conceal the complexity and constant evolution of sexual subjectivity, and hide the blurred boundaries between various queer identity groups. Importantly, the above description of gay men is not representative of all lower middle class gay men but primarily those who had direct social ties with khwaja siras and an interest in their cultural activities.

Another queer category that was excluded from the khwaja sira framework was *behrupīa*, a man who mimicked the appearance of khwaja siras either to earn a livelihood the khwaja sira way (i.e., through begging, singing, dancing and sex work) or to attract and engage in sexual conduct with men. Such a person could be heterosexual or homosexual, did not possess a feminine soul, did not join the guru-celā system, and occasionally dressed up like a khwaja sira. “They try to mimic our mannerisms but it doesn’t come from within them. It is an act,” said Noor. Similarly, Naima stated that, “they have no desire to walk like us, or to wear lipstick or wear women’s clothes.” Gender ambiguous people despised such men because they encroached upon their livelihood. Moreover, khwaja siras people claimed that the growing population of such individuals who roamed the streets in search of clients negatively impacted the reputation of authentic khwaja siras. This was not to say that khwaja siras did not engage in street-based sex work, but that some among them were believed to be *behrupīas*. In Chapter 8, I discuss the significance of *behrupīas* in khwaja sira media advocacy where they served as the metaphorical scapegoats for all social ills ascribed to khwaja siras by the general public.

### Identity Potpourri

Queer and khwaja sira identity categories in Pakistan were distinct but also imbricated, fluid, situated and perceived. Zennanas, for instance, inhabited two social worlds, the dominant society

where they were men, and the khwaja sira cultural system, where they were neither men nor women. Similarly, many lower middle class gay and transgender-identifying individuals who were inducted into khwaja sira households had three situated identities: man, gay, murat. Maria, for instance, had different names, one for each of the three overlapping domains of which she was a part. Zeeshan was her legal name, Vicky was the name by which she was known within her gay circle, and Maria was her feminine name in the khwaja sira social world. Each name encapsulated a different facet of her personality and lived experience. Maria started to identify as gay in her late teens when she discovered the underground gay social scene. However, she was unable to come into her own until she met a khwaja sira named Shani, who introduced her to gender ambiguous people with whom she was able to better identify. Maria retained ties with her gay friends' circle after her initiation into the khwaja sira social system. Gender/sexual minorities in Pakistan switched identities by emphasizing personal traits that were situationally appropriate.

Queer identities tended to overlap because they were somewhat ill-defined. As mentioned earlier, the understanding of khwaja sira differed across the various genderqueer identity groups. Categories were blurred further when identity terms were translated from English to Urdu. For example, some gender ambiguous youth self-identified as gay because they assumed it was the English equivalent of khwaja sira/murat. One NGO official pointed out that, "[t]he whole hijra and zennana thing in Pakistan is not defined. And now the MSM are also getting into the guru-celā system and they are speaking Farsi. So it's getting really messed up." Crucially, identities were perception-based in that individuals belonging to one identity group often misunderstood others because they categorized them through their own cultural lens. For instance, zennanas

were fundamentally homosexual men from the perspective of many upper and middle-class gay men because many zennanas did not cross-dress in everyday life.

## **Sex, Gender and Sexuality**

### Embodiment

Physical constitution was a vital aspect of the subjective experiences of khwaja siras since it provided visual cues to onlookers, both gender ambiguous and ordinary people, and enabled them to classify the queer subject and manage their interactions with them. Importantly, bodily features were indicative of a khwaja sira's desires, identity, and lifestyle choices. The devaluation of emasculation among khwaja siras augmented the significance of other types of somatic transformations. The importance of physical attractiveness increased the demand of beauty enhancing products and services among them. In addition to effeminate mannerisms (i.e., a feminine and often exaggerated style of walking and talking), khwaja siras enhanced their femininity in a number of other ways, including women's attire. They spent much time and money on clothing, particularly on outfits designed for special occasions, such as birthday parties and initiations. Most khwaja siras dressed in ordinary women's wear (i.e., shalvār qamīz) in everyday life, while preferring elaborate Eastern and Western inspired attire (e.g., evening gowns, cocktail dresses, embroidered saris, etc.) for special events. Clothes were accessorized with wigs, jewelry, makeup, etc.

Khwaja siras had a distinct appearance that set them apart from both men and women. In the public sphere, they stood out because of their ambiguous appearance (i.e., facial features and body structure). In addition, they drew attention to themselves through certain identity markers,

such as the distinctly hollow khwaja sira clap<sup>24</sup>, their flamboyant swagger, a high-pitched voice, and heavy makeup. It was not uncommon to see the faces of khwaja sira beggars layered with thick coats of homemade foundation and bright lipstick. Although many still wore gaudy outfits and makeup, in recent years there had been a marked shift in taste among urban gender ambiguous people who aspired to appear more like women and less like khwaja siras. Store-bought makeup was significantly lighter, and was associated with femininity, modernity and style. This contemporary urban look sharply contrasted with the sartoriality of rural khwaja siras. In addition, khwaja siras invested time and energy in products that concealed masculine traits, such as waxing and bleaching arm, leg and chest hair, plucking facial hair, and eyebrow and upper lip threading. Laser hair removal had also become common practice among those who could afford it, and skin-lightening creams were popular since fair complexion is associated with beauty in South Asia.



**Figure 3.** Khwaja siras beautifying themselves for a dance event. Salma threads her girlfriend's eyebrows (above, right).

Additionally, khwaja siras used a number of indigenous and biomedical techniques to enhance somatic femininity. Several non-invasive homegrown procedures were used for breast formation. One of these involved covering the edges of a bowl with warm dough for adhesion,

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<sup>24</sup> This clap was also a symbol of aggression. Khwaja siras clapped at each other during disputes in order to intimidate and insult opponents.

and then pressing the bowl over each nipple. Air suction made the bowl stick to the chest, producing a plunger effect. Moments later, the bowl was yanked out, which drew the chest outward and induced breast development. Others opted for less painful procedures, such as placing water balloons inside bras in order give the illusion of breasts. Khwaja siras also used medication, such as hormone pills and injection, to feminize their bodies. These drugs altered the hormonal balance of the body by increasing estrogen levels that led to breast formation, nipple expansion, and the redistribution of fat, which gave the body curvature. Gender ambiguous people were not unaware of the dangers of excessive hormone treatment since some had developed and died of estrogen-induced cancer.

Among invasive feminizing measures were a variety of surgeries that had gained popularity among khwaja siras. Gender ambiguous people spent money on breast implants, testicular castration, physical emasculation (i.e., *nirbān*; penectomy plus orchiectomy) and vaginoplasty. In 2011, I knew several khwaja siras in Karachi who travelled to Lahore to get breast implants where the procedure cost Rs. 50,000 (approx. \$571), almost half the price of surgeries in Karachi. Emasculation operations were mostly performed underground due to the religious prohibitions against them. In the past, gender ambiguous people ritually emasculated one another, however, in the contemporary context, doctors who were trusted within khwaja sira networks had been conducting them. After the procedure, a *nirbān* khwaja sira was left with a flattened area (*capty*) with a urinary passage that was unfit for sexual intercourse.

Vaginoplasty was the least common of these procedures, partly because it was not culturally valued within the khwaja sira system; a gender ambiguous person who surgically acquired a vagina (*seepo*) through SRS was considered a woman, which jeopardized her identity as a khwaja sira. The identifying feature of hijras was the state of being *nirbān*, that is, upon the



excision of the penis and testicles, they were anatomically neither male nor female. In contrast, those who undertook SRS became female, and according to some, could no longer be considered khwaja sira because their feminine souls were in harmony with their female bodies. Although some khwaja siras aspired to become women, many did not see the point of undergoing a painful sex change operation that did not enable them to reproduce and enjoy vaginal intercourse. Moreover, vaginoplasty was the most expensive of the operative measures available to gender ambiguous people<sup>25</sup>. Khwaja siras who planned on having a sex change began their transformation by getting castrated while they saved up for a vaginoplasty. The penis was retained for the surgical construction of a neovagina, which utilized the penile skin for the assembly of the vulva, clitoris and vagina. On the legal front, sex-reassignment surgeries did not lead to a subsequent change of sex on one's birth certificate. However, in a few known cases, Pakistani courts had permitted sex-reassignment operations as treatment for gender identity disorder<sup>26</sup>. However, ordinary khwaja siras were unaware of these options, and typically lacked the resources to undergo the expensive surgery let alone contest a precarious court case.

### Partners

The relationships between gender ambiguous people and their partners shed light on their gendered and sexual desires and practices. The Farsi term *giryā* generally referred to the male lover or partner of a khwaja sira. It was not an identity label since the men who khwaja siras referred to as *giryās* did not self-identify as such. Most *giryās* were heterosexual men or those who were exclusively attracted to gender ambiguous people. Khwaja siras most commonly

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<sup>25</sup> In 2011, Meera's basic nirbān surgery cost as little as Rs. 17,000 (approx. \$194) in Hyderabad, while vaginoplasty cost close to Rs. 250,000 (approx. \$2,857) in Lahore.

<sup>26</sup> The petitioners had made a case, one endorsed by medical professionals, that the patient faced a threat to life if not permitted to undergo a sex change.

referred to their giryās as “friend” (*dost*), which served to euphemize the sexual nature of their relationship for outsiders. Khwaja siras maintained both long- and short-term relationships with their lovers. The term used for long-term partners was *pakī kā giryā* (permanent giryā), who was likened to a husband<sup>27</sup>. Ideally, giryās and khwaja siras were expected to be monogamous. However, many gender ambiguous people secretly managed relationships with more than one lover at a time. Others entered into monogamous love affairs, but as sex workers, engaged in routine sexual encounters with clients. Gender ambiguous people made a distinction between giryās and clients/admirers (*pun/cāmkā*). However, colloquially, the term giryā was used to refer to all men who were potentially sexually accessible to khwaja siras.<sup>28</sup>

As men, giryās stood in contrast to women (*nehāro*) and to khwaja siras. For a gender variant person to engage in sexual relationships with women was against the khwaja sira ideal, but in practice, many maintained long-term relationships with their wives. Similarly, sex between gender ambiguous people was prohibited and considered undesirable according to khwaja sira cultural values, and those found guilty of involvement in such behavior were routinely rebuked and ridiculed. What was even worse than sexual encounters with women and khwaja siras was to be sexually attracted to them. The ideal object of a khwaja sira’s sexual desire was supposed to be a man—not a woman or a khwaja sira. Those who found women and

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<sup>27</sup> The ideal relationship between a khwaja sira and her giryā was based on love and commitment. Khwaja siras and their partners expressed love for one another in a number of ways. Certain public displays of affection, such as hand-feeding one another during meals, were common. Hajra’s partner of ten years was a rickshaw driver who had named his rickshaw after her by painting her name on the rear of the vehicle. Love was also expressed through self-inflicted pain. Some resorted to hurting themselves either as a way of coping with heartbreak or as a public expression of their love. Suicides attempts were also common.

<sup>28</sup> In addition to giryās and clients/admirers, the third category of males with whom gender ambiguous people had sexual contact were known as *mīthe cāval* (also a sweet rice dessert). In the khwaja sira world, the term referred to adolescent and young men who many khwaja siras found sexually attractive. Typically, sex with these individuals did not involve a cash exchange since it was considered sex for pleasure rather than work.

gender ambiguous people desirable risked having their gender/sexual identity thrown into question.

### *Khwaja Sira Weddings*

The narratives and experiences of khwaja siras reveal that they aspired to be married to men, a desire they were painfully aware would remain unfulfilled due to religious and social prohibitions<sup>29</sup>. Khwaja siras fulfilled the desire for marriage through certain ritualized practices that provided some of the pleasures of being married to men. Primary among these was the ritual celebration of *giryās* (*giryē kā joṛā jalsah*), which resembled heteronormative weddings. On these occasions, the bride and groom dressed up in traditional bridal wear, and rituals that are typically observed at heteronormative weddings (e.g., *mehndī* procession) were performed. Traditional *ḍāṇḍīā* (stick) dances were took place at some of these events along with solo routines by individual khwaja siras. This was followed by the distribution of sweets and dinner. Moreover, the khwaja sira mother of the bride arranged a dowry for her daughter, which, depending on her affordability, included several outfits, kitchenware and even furniture (see “Mothers and Daughters”).

A key element of heteronormative weddings that was missing from a lover’s celebration was the *nikā’*, the Islamic marriage rite that legally and religiously affirms the relationship between husbands and wives. Informants claimed having no desire to conduct a *nikā’* since the ritual was permissible only between a man and a woman. I was told that it was sinful to mar the sacred rite by using it to officiate the forbidden union of a man and a khwaja sira. By avoiding

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<sup>29</sup> The South Indian hijras in Reddy’s study also idealized marriage and yearned for love and the possibility of a long-term commitment with their partners (2005, 169).

the nikā' ceremony, khwaja siras upheld not only dominant religious beliefs but also the conviction that they were not women.

Beyond the actual ceremony, there were several other aspects of the girya's celebration that mimicked a heteronormative marriage.

The senior khwaja siras get together with the couple to establish rules, such as you will give her this much every month and in return you can put so and so restriction on her, if you do so and so, then she can break the friendship with you, or if you decide to end your relationship then you will have to pay a fine. The man might say that if she leaves me and goes to someone else, then I will make her bald. Now a khwaja sira's best feature is her hair, so she wouldn't want a bald head.

This oral agreement resembles a nikā', which is essentially an Islamic prenuptial contract. The meeting served to formalize an otherwise unstructured and socially unrecognized relationship.

In addition to the lover's celebration, wedding rituals were often fused into khwaja sira cultural events. I learned that it was not uncommon for khwaja siras to dress up in bridal clothes at their initiation ceremonies and birthday parties and to be referred to as brides (*dūlhan*). Many of the practices that were incorporated into these events were adopted directly from heteronormative weddings. For instance, at her initiation, Mehek dressed in a traditional red colored bridal outfit paired with heavy jewelry and henna on her hands. Next she was showered with rose petals as she entered the house accompanied by her girlfriends, similar to the way brides are ushered in a bridal procession. Later, during the photo and video shoot, Mehek followed the cultural script for brides by imitating stereotypical bridal poses that showed off her clothes, jewelry and henna-covered hands<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Yet another practice of feeling married was through wedding photographs. For instance, Shehzadi had put up two such framed photographs in her house. In the first one, she stood alongside her partner dressed in bridal wear. Upon a closer look, I noticed that Shehzadi and her partner's facial images had been superimposed over the photograph of a bride and groom. The second photograph showed Shehzadi standing by herself in a bedroom. Again, her face had been laid over the photo of a bride standing before a studio backdrop of a bedroom.

Why did khwaja siras incorporate wedding-like rituals into their cultural events? Nadia explained the meaning behind the practice in the following words:

[We dress up like brides because] we have women-like emotions within us...[At these events] only one person dresses up like a bride...She looks different from everyone else so that everyone will know that it is her birthday. We also desire a lover...Every khwaja sira has a girya, a friend. So what happens is that her boyfriend is also there at these events, so she dresses up like a bride for him. This way, a craving that we within us is fulfilled.

In reality, khwaja siras could not get legally married to their lovers, and publically they denied the desire for such unions. However, a closer look at khwaja sira cultural practices reveals a deep yearning for marriage with men. Unfortunately, dressing up like brides was as close as they could possibly get to fulfilling this fantasy. Enacting a wedding was a means of satisfying the desire to be a bride and to be the center of everyone's attention just as brides are on their wedding day.

### *Gender/Sexual Roles*

In order to fulfill their deep-seated desire to have husbands and to live happy married lives, many khwaja siras cohabitated with their partners and assumed the role of housewives. Khwaja siras found myriad possibilities of imagining and mimicking marriage-like arrangements with their partners. Murat-girya relationship dynamics demonstrate that, far from complicating and resisting the heteronormative gender binary, khwaja siras reproduced heteronormativity through their gendered/sexual roles.

They assumed women's roles and performed wifely duties while their partners enacted the role of husbands. "If I make dinner," said Nadia, "he brings the bread." Nadia indicates a gendered division of labor where she took care of the domestic/private sphere (e.g., cooking, cleaning, doing laundry), and her partner supported the household through his participation in the

public domain (e.g., earning a living, grocery shopping). However, many khwaja siras financially supported their lovers, a gendered arrangement that was frowned upon among hijras and zennanas. The ideal relationship was one where the giryā had a job through which he earned a living to support his khwaja sira lover.

Khwaja siras were typically the passive sexual partners or recipients during sexual intercourse with men. Although their sexual behavior did not always conform to a strict receptive/penetrative oppositional binary (Khan and Khilji 2002), in sexual unions with lovers, they mostly assumed the role of the receptive feminine partner<sup>31</sup>. Instances of gender ambiguous people penetrating their lovers were rare since the expected and desired relationship configuration between them was best categorized in terms of the complementary masculine-feminine binary.

Gender ambiguous people's views pertaining to the sexual practices of gay men are illustrative of the cultural constitution of gendered/sexual preferences within the khwaja sira universe. Khwaja siras expressed repulsion towards gay sex practices, including the fact that gay men had sex with people of their own kind (i.e., other gay people), and that both partners in a same-sex sexual encounter often took turns to penetrate one another. "Khwaja siras don't like gays because they do it to each other," said Hasi. "We think it is wrong because we are not allowed to do it to one another." Below, Payal expresses her disgust and bewilderment over the very idea of sex between men.

Gays have sex with gays, but we hate it. How can we fulfill our desires with someone who is from among us? We run even from the thought of it. And we don't have sex with

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<sup>31</sup> Shazia informed me that her giryā had never expressed an interest in being penetrated by her. During sexual intercourse, he avoided touching her penis and testicles, which Shazia carefully secured either in her panties or between her legs lest he experienced the displeasure of grazing against them. Similarly, Nadia's lover would not allow her to penetrate him. She had, however, penetrated her former partner.

each other because we establish relationships with one another. That way, we are able to have respect for one another. But those who have sex with their own people are not one of us (she claps). I don't see how it is even possible. Even if a dog goes insane, it won't eat another dog's meat. And we think that giryās should remain giryās and murats should remain murats. There are some giryās who like to both give and receive, and similarly there are some khwaja siras too who like both. But we consider it a bad thing. I think that a gay who is someone's husband should only be a husband, and if he wants he can be some other person's wife, but not both the husband and the wife of the same person.

According to the khwaja sira belief system, sexual/gender complementarity was the basis of sexual conduct between any two people. This logic rendered impossible sex between people of the same gender. Accordingly, gender ambiguous people were expected to only engage in sexual liaisons with men, and to adopt the role of the passive partner. Moreover, sex between khwaja siras was forbidden because it undermined the khwaja sira kinship structure. Khwaja siras extended this cultural reasoning to gay men who they believed should not have sex with other gay men, and if they did, they should at least maintain a strict top/bottom oppositional binary within any given sexual encounter or relationship. Khwaja siras morally elevated themselves from gay men on the basis of their sexual practices, thereby locating themselves higher along the social hierarchy.

### **Hijraness**

The concept of *hijarpan*, which can roughly be translated as hijraness<sup>32</sup>, referred to the essence of being a hijra, and was at the heart of khwaja sira culture and game playing. Hijraness was among the markers of hijra identity, one that was roughly at par with physical emasculation. Importantly, hijraness was also accessible to zennanas; zennanas were often called hijras in praise if they exhibited hijraness. "To become a hijra you don't just have to get rid of your

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<sup>32</sup> In his study of hijras in Dhaka, Bangladesh, anthropologist, Adnan Hossain, describes a similar, though not identical, concept, which he dubs "hijrahood" (*hijragiri*) (2012, 496).

penis,” said Payal. “You become a hijra when you do what hijras do and behave like them. To become a hijra means to have *hijarpan*.” To possess hijraness meant to be a fully acculturated *khwaja sira*. Despite its significance, few managed to properly harness it. “Playing” *hijarpan* (*hijarpan khelnā*) was an art that required years of experience within the *khwaja sira* world along with guidance from those who possessed it. Hijraness, then, were performances or “aesthetic practices- patterns of behavior, ways of speaking, manners of bodily comportment- whose repetitions...structur[ed] individual and group identities” (Kapchan 1995, 479). These repetitions were “at once a reenactment and a re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler 2002, 178).

Hijraness variously referred to the coveted body of hijra knowledge as well as to a set of ideal traits and gendered practices. Hence, to possess hijraness meant not only to be familiar with the history and traditions of hijras, but also to exhibit certain skills through performance, such as by saying and doing that which was expected of hijras. In addition to having expertise in *khwaja sira* rituals and customs, the traits associated with hijraness included the dexterous use of the tongue, that is, the ability to speak masterfully, win arguments, twist conversations, bend logic, confuse opponents in verbal combat, to insult, and to verbally defend oneself. Another characteristic of a “true hijra” was being cognizant of *khwaja sira* mentality, and using one’s insight about their thought process to predict how they might behave in certain situations. Payal often prided herself for being “familiar with every little vein of hijras.” This psychosocial knowledge gave certain *khwaja siras* the power to create and resolve rifts and to manipulate others for personal protection and gain. In sum, *hijarpan* entailed being cunning, shrewd, resourceful and quick-witted. These are what James Scott describes as the attributes of a



trickster, who “makes his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies...not by his strength but by his wit and cunning” (1990, 162).

Hence, hijraness was essential to the khwaja sira games of deception (and vice versa) since only those who possessed these special qualities could successfully outmaneuver opponents. These qualities enabled a gender ambiguous person to respond to ridicule and critique, to maintain respectability, and to find loopholes within a heteronormative world. Among these practices, maintaining respect was also particularly important to the Indian hijras in Reddy’s study (2005). Hijraness informed the representational strategies that khwaja siras employed not only in interactions among themselves but also in exchanges with the general public. Hijraness shaped khwaja sira social relationships and was a crucial defense mechanism that gender ambiguous people that developed to ensure their survival in a world where they were victims of oppression.

In the excerpt below, Shani speaks in admiration of Payal and Juhi’s hijarpan while highlighting the characteristics that qualified them as true hijras.

I only consider a person like Mother Payal a hijra. There are so many who don’t have a brain and they just sit in one corner. They may be the most beautiful murats, but they don’t have the talent that *Māṇ* Payal has. She is a complete hijra. Among zennanas there is just one khwaja sira who I consider a hijra. Her name is Juhi, and she plays hijarpan with those in the lower echelons. She’s very good at making people fight. For instance, when a conflict between Juhi and Afi took place, all the khadras of Pyala Hotel and the surrounding areas came over to Afi’s house. Juhi typically wears pant-shirt. There, outside Afi’s house, the murats clapped at Juhi and said, “Boy! We want to talk to you!” Juhi clapped back and said, “*Aye!* What use is the penis you have between your legs?” Right there, she shut them all up. Then she organized another meeting among hijras and there she insulted Afi by saying, “You are the father of so many children, and you have gotten breasts! Don’t you feel ashamed?” Afi fell silent right then and there.

Shani’s description of Payal and Juhi’s traits suggests that hijraness involved being mentally sharp, possessing the ability to win arguments, to successfully insult an antagonist, and to deploy a creative verbal assault in self-defense. Juhi managed to fight her adversaries by exposing their

genital status to onlookers outside Afi's house. In doing so, she reproduced the beliefs of dominant society pertaining to sex/gender and corporeality. Further, she morally elevated herself from Afi by calling her selfish for not considering the impact of acquiring breasts on her wife and children's reputation.

Gender ambiguous people could build their status within khwaja sira circles by demonstrating hijraness. As a leadership quality of sorts, it was sought in khwaja sira gurus, elders and chiefs. Below, Soni illustrates the relationship between hijraness and leadership.

A murat must build a lot of respect before she can become a leader. She should have a lot of celās, should know how to talk properly, should know how to make the right decisions, and should not get verbally trashed by participants. If there's a meeting taking place somewhere, and all the murats there start clapping and insulting, the elder should not sit quietly because then everyone will say, "Look at her, she has become a chief but does not even know how to talk."

Soni highlights the importance of superior speaking skills among zennana and hijra chiefs. Moreover, she indicates that these speaking skills required a quick-wit, which was beneficial in numerous other tricky situations where quick thinking and swift problem-solving skills were necessary. In addition, hijraness entailed the high-spirited behavior that khwaja siras commonly displayed in conflict situations, where aggressive ranting, clapping and insulting were the norm.

Khwaja siras used their hijraness to play with the world around them. This often entailed a certain manner of speaking.

We khwaja siras have a way of talking in circles, in a confusing manner, at the end of which, people say that they don't want to speak with us ever again. When people are mean to us on the streets, instead of fighting with them, we use our tongues. We never stopped wagging our tongues. Our tongues help us win. We leave our minds and our tongues open.

Above, Payal indicates that those who possessed hijraness responded to oppression by talking in an artful manner that ensured triumph. This involved confusing rivals by twisting logic and by employing circular speech. This style of speaking also helped to maintain secrecy and a sense of

indeterminacy about khwaja sira bodies and sexuality. Interlocutors often deployed this strategy on me in order to conceal knowledge about their corporeal status and sexualized lifestyle. One evening in late April, I asked Nighat and Mano to explain the difference between the different types of khwaja siras. Two hours later, I left Nighat's house dazed and confused by their bewildering banter, and feeling more uncertain about khwaja sira identity categories than ever before. My informants had deliberately contradicted themselves so many times during the conversation that I was no longer able to distinguish one classification from another.

### **Gender Ambiguity**

I conclude this section by assessing the aptness of the term “gender ambiguous” for khwaja siras by drawing upon a constructionist understanding of gender as being distinct from sex and consisting of both internal gender identity and gender performance (Butler 2002). Apart from the mismatch between their bodies and souls, I argue that khwaja siras were rendered ambiguous due to the combination of several gendered characteristics that were often at odds with one another. First, they possessed a feminine soul as opposed to a woman's soul, which partly explains why they did not perceive themselves as or wished to become women even though they were drawn to women's roles and feminine embodiment. Moreover, even if they transformed themselves into women by surgically acquiring a neovagina, they knew that they still would not be able to reproduce, which, according to them, was integral to womanhood.

Second, in terms of practice, khwaja siras selectively engaged in both feminine and masculine performance. Their gender ambiguity was evident in their fluid and situated identities, especially when they traversed between familial and khwaja sira spaces, and accordingly transitioned between their masculine and feminine selves by switching their gendered

embodiment and sartorial practices. Third, their gender ambiguity was evident in traits that were specific to khwaja siras (e.g., exaggerated femininity, the distinct khwaja sira clap, high-pitched voice). These attributes, which included the qualities of hijraness or hijarpan, exceeded the masculine and the feminine. In other words, their gender attributes not only switched between the characteristics of men and women but also surpassed the binary gender system. Hence, regardless of their sex/body, khwaja siras' gender alone rendered them ambiguous, and although they reproduced many gender norms, they also complicated gender through their ambiguity.

### **Khwaja Sira Family**

#### The Guru-Celā Bond

Khwaja siras described two sets of relationships as the cornerstone of their social structure, the guru-celā (mentor-student) and the *mān-betī* (mother-daughter) bonds. In practice, however, the former relationship was far more important to the survival of the khwaja sira cultural system.

The gurulesh had no value in the eyes of khwaja siras since recognition within the system was obtained through the guru's lineage and retained upon the guru's death. Those not affiliated with a khwaja sira family lacked not only an identity but also access to the material and social privileges of membership into this system. While the gurulesh were ridiculed for their lack of affiliation, the celāless were unable to build a reputation if they failed to adopt disciples to continue their legacy. Hence, the guru-celā bond was both essential and mutually beneficial.

Although guru and celā are Sanskrit terms that are deeply rooted in Hinduism (Gould 1969, 292), the mentor-student relationship is not unfamiliar to the Muslim tradition wherein the fundamental relationship of Islamic Sufi orders is structured around masters (*pīr*) and disciples (*murīd*) (Hassan 557, 1987).

### *Entering the “Field”*

Khwaja sira narratives of entering the field diverged from induction myths that circulated in mainstream society. The common misconception was that gender ambiguous people seized possession of intersexual newborns from parents and raised them as khwaja siras. However, the personal testimonies of gender ambiguous people about their early encounters with the field indicate that most voluntarily joined the field, typically between the ages of nine and eighteen. For many, the first glimpse into this world was through khwaja siras within their immediate neighborhoods. Curiosity about and yearning to be like khwaja siras drew many into the field.

### *Novice Training and Initiation*

Murats learned under the guidance of their gurus, either through direct training or by observing, asking questions and making mistakes. Trainings covered aspects of khwaja sira livelihood, and were aimed at enabling novices to start earning the khwaja sira way. Students learned how to sing, dance, beg and bless, and to seek and negotiate with clients. They were taught Farsi, the secret vernacular of khwaja siras, along with other aspects of khwaja sira culture, such as rules of conduct and rituals<sup>33</sup>. Importantly, novices learned hijraness through their gurus, which included methods of survival in an oppressive heteronormative world. They gained an intuitive understanding of the significance of maintaining secrecy about stigmatizing aspects of khwaja sira culture by witnessing the deceptive practices of their elders.

Further, they were guided through various modes of feminine embodiment, such as dressing in women’s clothes, applying makeup, learning the hijra clap, and speaking in a high-

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, students were taught to touch the knees of their gurus and seniors prior to dancing. The practice was a way of according respect and receiving permission to perform.

pitched voice. Although novices were interested in many of these gendered activities since childhood, they learned the khwaja sira way of performing them upon entering the field. These gendered performances were culturally specific practices, embodied through “the repeated stylization of the body...congeal[ed] over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (Butler 2002, 43-44). However, far from being natural, khwaja siras “became” khwaja siras by “doing” or following available gender scripts. Novices also learned to perform domestic gender roles, which included household chores, such as cooking and cleaning.



**Figure 4.** Malka initiating a new khwaja sira into her family by piercing her nose with a threading needle.

Upon entering the field, novices were expected to financially contribute to the khwaja sira household. However, accessing khwaja sira sources of livelihood often necessitated that they officially joined a khwaja sira family through initiation. Only after a khwaja sira became someone’s celā was she recognized as an official constituents of the khwaja sira social structure, permitted to beg/bless in the areas designated to her guru<sup>34</sup> and invited to dance events. Although a staple ritual, the initiation ceremony (*rasm-e-celā*) differed slightly across the various khwaja

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<sup>34</sup> Hijra families had designated earning areas called vīrats where clan members were permitted to beg and bless.

sira communities<sup>35</sup>. Through initiation, the initiate formed a bond and reciprocated not only with her mentor but also with the guru's extended family.

### *Mutual Benefits*

By forging bonds with mentors, celās not only gained recognition within the khwaja sira social system, but also access to khwaja sira cultural activities (e.g., rituals, meetings, dance events) and livelihood options, such as access to a mentor's earning area (*vīrat*) and a steady stream of clients. Membership also offered safe spaces where novices could express gendered desires in the company of other gender ambiguous people.

For mentors, celās were supplementary sources of income. There were several ways in which gurus earned through disciples, but these rules varied by region, community type, and by a guru's dexterity in obtaining money. First, live-in celās contributed to rent and other household expenses. Second, a seniority allowance (*barāpān*) was given to gurus by independently housed celās in deference to the mentor's superiority. The allowances symbolized respect for mentors and highlighted the status differential between gurus and celās, while improper reciprocity denoted lack of reverence. Even though the allowance was a guru's right, there were no firm rules for how often and how much should be given. Some gurus expected unreasonable allowances from celās, but students were also generally very tightfisted. These negotiations often led to tensions between disciples and mentors. Third, group blessings (*vadhāī*), in which several

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<sup>35</sup> At a minimum, the ritual involved covering the initiate's head with a scarf. Some khwaja sira communities pierced the nose or stained it with edible lime. This was followed by a ritualized exchange where the mentor and disciple reciprocated one another with cash and gifts (e.g., unstitched cloth). The cash amounts were typically fixed figures that varied by region and community type and were periodically increased to reflect the cost of inflation. In addition, the guests made cash contributions to the mentor and the student. During fieldwork, I attended several initiation ceremonies. I was thrilled to be invited to these sacred ceremonies since outsiders were typically barred from observing them.

members of a khwaja sira family blessed newborns and newly married couples, was another earning option for gurus. The guru could claim a share (*bakhrā*) of the earnings even if she did not accompany her students to confer blessings<sup>36</sup>. Gurus believed they had a right to the money earned through blessings since students lived off their territories.

Fourth, commissions earned through the provision of space for sex-work was another approach to earning through disciples. Safe and private spaces were scarce, especially for those who lived in their parental homes. Fifth, the transfer of a celā from one guru to another was typically profitable for a mentor. When an individual decided to sever ties with her guru and wished to take on another khwaja sira as her mentor, the new guru had to pay the old one a transfer fee called *peshā*. The celā, then, was a form of investment that the guru could cash in when the two decided to part ways. Celās also provided domestic assistance to gurus. The division of labor between mentors and live-in students was generally egalitarian with tasks distributed equally between the residents of a household. Independently housed celās also occasionally helped out in the guru's house.

### Mothers and Daughters

Next to the guru-celā relationship, the social relationship that khwaja siras held in high regard was the mother-daughter (*mān-betī*) bond<sup>37</sup>. A mother was expected to serve the emotional and material needs that a guru could not. When disputes occurred with gurus, khwaja siras could live with their mothers just the way women return to their natal homes during conflicts with in-laws.

Mothers could not set restrictions on daughters the way mentors could on disciples. From a

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<sup>36</sup> For instance, if a guru sent four of her celās to bless, the money earned was split five ways, and one of the five portions went to the guru. This way, the guru could earn by sitting at home or earn through other means while her celās went out to bless.

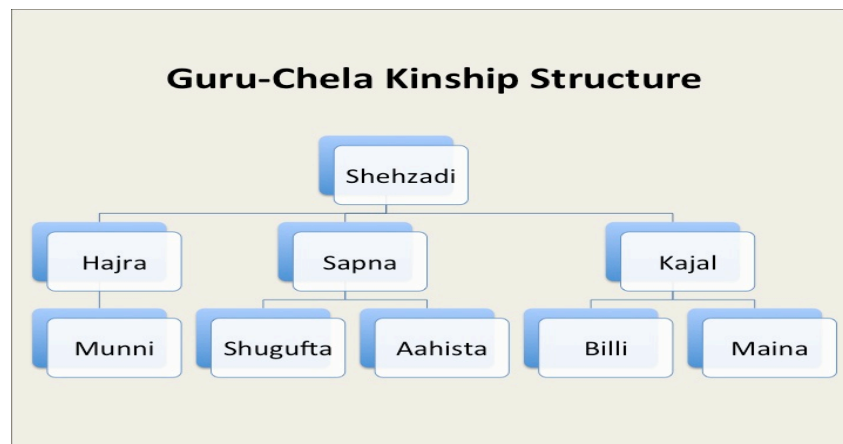
<sup>37</sup> A khwaja sira's mother and guru did not share a spousal relationship with one another.



daughter's perspective, gurus were takers and mothers were givers, but for mothers, daughters were expensive because they were given money and gifts on special occasions, such as initiations and birthdays<sup>38</sup>. Hence, khwaja siras preferred to initiate more students than daughters. The mother-daughter relationship, like the guru-celā bond, was forged through a ritualized ceremony. Likewise, this bond could be ritually dissolved through the return of all items or an equivalent sum received from the mother. Mothers could have several inducted daughters, but a daughter was permitted just one mother at any given time. Figure 2 illustrates the kinship ties between mothers and daughters.

### Kinship Structure

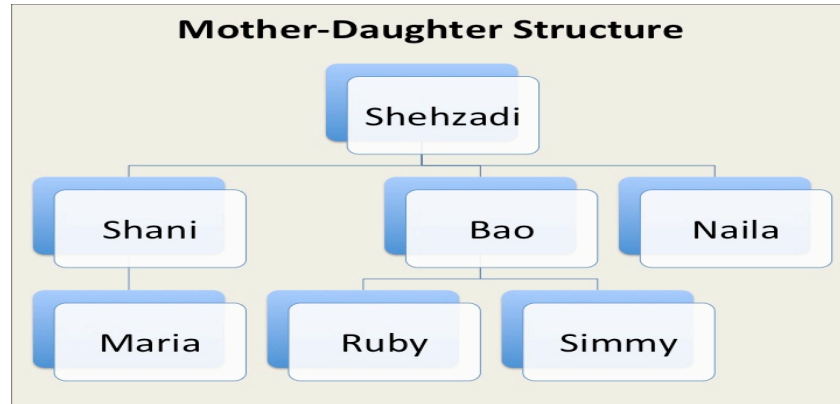
Figures 1 and Figure 2 illustrate the guru-celā and the māṇ-betī structures, respectively.



**Figure 5.** The kinship term used by a khwaja sira's disciples (e.g., Hajra and Sapna) for one another was *guru-bhāī*, where *bhāī* means brother in Urdu. A khwaja sira's student's disciple (e.g., Munni, Aahista) was her *potrā celā*, where *potrā* is phonetically similar to *potā* and *potī*, the Urdu words for paternal grandchildren. A *potrā celā* was also called *poti* (paternal granddaughter). The kinship term used by *potrā celās* for their guru's mentor (i.e., Shehzadi) was *dād-guru*, where *dād* is reminiscent of *dādā* and *dādī*, the Urdu terms for paternal grandparents. A *dād-guru* was also referred to as *dādī* (paternal grandmother). A khwaja sira's *guru-bhāī*'s

<sup>38</sup> If a daughter were to die, the mother was expected to arrange one of the meals at her mourning.

student was her *bhatījā celā* (paternal nephew) or *bhatījī* (paternal niece), and a khwaja sira's mentor's guru-bhāī was her *caccā guru* (paternal uncle). Hence, Munni was Sapna's *bhatījā celā* and Sapna was Munni's *caccā guru*. In some cases, male and female paternal kin terms were used interchangeably.



**Figure 6.** A khwaja sira's daughters (e.g., Shani and Bao) were sisters, and her daughter's daughters (e.g., Maria and Ruby) were her maternal granddaughters (*navāsī*). Granddaughters viewed their mother's mothers as maternal grandmothers (*nānī*). Moreover, the mother-daughter and guru-celā structure intersected. A khwaja sira could simultaneously be a mentor and a mother to different gender ambiguous people, and her students and daughters were brothers and sisters to one another. For instance, Shehzadi's disciple, Hajra, and her daughter, Shani, were siblings.

Although the khwaja sira familial structure did not neatly mimic either the patrilineal or matrilineal stratification systems, it was closer in configuration to the former. This is not to say that those within this system were male or masculine, but that between the two central relationships within the structure, the masculinized mentor-student bond was preferred over the feminine mother-daughter one. This was evident in the fact that gender ambiguous people were identified through their gurus rather than their mothers. Gurus had supreme authority and decision-making power, and many expressed their seniority by repressing juniors, preventing them from expressing opinions and overriding their decisions. This suggests that the khwaja sira social system was marked by both masculine power and privilege.

### *Becoming a Mentor*

In order to become a guru, a khwaja sira was expected to possess cultural knowledge of and experience with the rules and traditions of khwaja siras and be able to impart them to juniors. When disciples broke rules or ran into conflict, gurus were expected to shoulder the responsibility for their errors and mediate disputes, a burden that many were reluctant to bear. Age was not a prerequisite for mentorship since social relationships within the khwaja sira system were not structured by age.

### *The Rules of Succession*

The disciples of a khwaja sira were the rightful heirs to her property and earning area upon her death<sup>39</sup>. The very first student initiate of a khwaja sira had the highest status among her brethren, and was successor to her territory. As the new head of the household, she was expected to possess leadership qualities, such as the ability to protect her family's interests by dexterously using her tongue to win arguments during disputes. As a rule, priority was given to the senior most student, however, another disciple was elected as the head if the eldest lacked leadership skills.

### *Death Rituals*

There was much controversy in mainstream society about khwaja sira funerary practices, and a prominent myth was that gender ambiguous people buried their dead late at night in their homes. These misapprehensions existed because khwaja siras were never seen carrying their deceased in funeral processions. On the day of a khwaja sira's death, her chosen family did the bathing and shrouding of the corpse, while the neighborhood men were asked to conduct the funeral prayers

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<sup>39</sup> Khwaja siras could give away property to daughters during their lifetime, but upon death, only their disciples had a right to their wealth.

and burial. Moreover, khwaja sira burials were few and far between since the funerals of married gender ambiguous people were performed by their biological kin. Khwaja siras visited the grave several days after the burial, and organized death rituals. Known as *roṭī*<sup>40</sup> in Farsi, these ceremonies spanned several days and were among the most expensive and elaborate lifecycle rituals. At the end of the grieving period, mourners were allowed to wear makeup, to sing and dance, and resume daily earning activities.

### Khwaja Sira Network

The khwaja sira network was made up of several social systems, ethnic groups, and lineages. The two main khwaja sira social systems were the hijra and zennana networks<sup>41</sup>, each of which consisted of several sub-groups. One of the key differences between the zennana and hijra social

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<sup>40</sup> Khwaja siras gathered to mourn on each day of grieving. The guru-bhāīs and students of the deceased covered their heads with white scarves, and the guests were served food. The collection of funds that took place on each mourning day assisted in covering the cost of food, the coffin, the fee of the gravedigger and the cleric who led the funeral prayer, etc. These offerings eased the financial burden on those responsible for organizing roṭīs. The successor of the deceased hosted most of the mourning events with the exception of the thirty-fifth day (*velā*), which was arranged by the deceased's mother. The fortieth day of mourning (*cālīsva* or *khatam roṭī*) marked the end of the mourning period. Hereafter, the mourning scarves were cast off to symbolize a ceremonial departure from grieving. In some communities, the new heads of households were inducted on this day. Mourning events also served as venues for community meetings (*caṭāīs*) where important matters were discussed and conflicts were resolved. Roṭīs were opportunities to end long-standing disputes since they mobilized entire clans.

<sup>41</sup> Depending on the context, the terms *zennana* and *hijra* could refer either to distinct khwaja sira social systems or identity categories. As an identity category, *zennana* generally referred to a gender ambiguous person who possessed male genitalia (*akvā*), and *hijra* was used for a person who was physically emasculated through the surgical removal of the penis and testicles (*nirbān*). A person's corporeal status was not a criterion for membership into either the zennana or the hijra system, which meant that both consisted of those who were and were not emasculated. There was significant intermingling between members of zennana and hijra subsystems; those who were inducted into the zennana network could also be initiated into hijra families and vice versa, regardless of corporeal status. Hence, a khwaja sira could simultaneously be a member of both systems and have two gurus, one in a zennana and the other in a hijra household. The advantage of dabbling in both systems was that one not only attained the authority to participate in their governing but also forged alliances with a larger network of khwaja siras.

systems, in addition to their members being loosely divided along the lines of corporeality, was that zennana families did not own earning areas (*vīrat*). Unlike hijras, zennana families were either restricted to begging on the city's main thoroughfares and commercial districts or they had to rely on other sources of income, such as dancing and prostitution. Hence, a key benefit of joining a hijra household was that it provided access to a lucrative livelihood option, which was also considered more respectable than sex work<sup>42</sup>.

The zennana and hijra social systems were divided into several subcategories. The zennana structure was made up of four groups or circles (*dāīrah*), including the *Marzai*, *Ravannay*, *Muhavti* and *Chandni* circles<sup>43</sup>. Similarly, the hijra network was divided into several ethnic groups (e.g., Sindhi, Hindustani, Sarhadi<sup>44</sup>), and each ethnicity (*zaāt*) was further subdivided into lineages. For instance, the Sindhi ethnic group consisted of the *Badshehzadi*, *Vazirzadi*, *Lashkarye* and *Naguru* lineages, while *Rai Walay*, *Ganga Rami* and *Aligarh* fell under Hindustanis<sup>45</sup>. Khwaja siras could join any lineage regardless of their place of birth. For instance,

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<sup>42</sup> The zennana social system was not prominent in Karachi even though the city was full of zennanas. These individuals joined the hijra network, which was the only platform that existed for gender ambiguous people in Karachi. The zennana social system was more prevalent in parts of Punjab, where it coexisted with the hijra system. Although the zennana structure was not prominent in Karachi, some zennanas with roots in Punjab, practiced it on a very small-scale.

<sup>43</sup> Each circle was represented by one or more leader (*codhry*) in community meetings.

<sup>44</sup> These ethnicities indicated the origin of each group. For instance, Hindustanis represented hijra groups that originated in parts of contemporary India.

<sup>45</sup> The various khwaja sira social systems, ethnicities and lineages had distinct histories, statuses, and sets of rules and traditions. Communal affiliations existed between certain but not all khwaja sira groups. Specifically, zennana circles tended to be associated with one another, and hijra lineages belonging to the same ethnic group were also typically interlinked. For instance, the three Sindhi lineages, namely Badshehzadis, Vazirzadis and Nagurus were institutionally connected. Their alliance necessitated the exchange of *peshā* (transfer fee) between the members of these lineages. This meant that when a person from a Naguru family decided to become the student of a khwaja sira from a Badshehzadi household, her new mentor had to transfer payment to her old guru in order to complete the exchange. Upon the receipt of payment, the disciple no longer retained ties with her old mentor. However, such alliances did not exist either between the hijra and zennana social systems or between hijra ethnic groups. For instance, the Sindhi and

among Sindhis, the Naguru lineage consisted of gender ambiguous people from across Pakistan. Migrants from the Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces came to Karachi where they joined Hindustani and Sindhi lineages. Upon admission, these individuals were identified on the basis of the ethnic groups they joined irrespective of their natal ethnicity. However, this did not prevent those inducted into the same ethnic group or lineage from stigmatizing one another on the basis of natal ethnic difference.

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Hindustani ethnic groups were not associated with one another. Hence, when an individual from a Badshehzadi family became the student of a khawaja sira from a Ganga Rami household, her new mentor was not required to make a transfer payment to her Badshehzadi guru in order to induct the disciple into her family. Upon initiation into the Ganga Rami household, the student simultaneously gained membership into two families and was allowed to maintain ties with her old mentor. Moreover, some hijra lineages, particularly in Punjab, were affiliated with the zennana network, that is, they could give *pesha* in exchange for students belonging to a zennana family.

In addition, each khwaja sira lineage had a distinct origin story. Nagurus traced their origins to Muhammad bin Qasim's arrival in the Indian subcontinent. Muhammad bin Qasim (695–715 A.D.) was a general of the Umayyad Caliphate who conquered regions along the Indus River that are now parts of the Sindh and Punjab provinces in Pakistan. According to the version this story narrated to me by Payal, the lineage started when bin Qasim annexed parts of Sindh. The only two khwaja siras he brought along with him from Arabia settled in the city of Nagar Thatta, and started the Naguru lineage. These stories were passed down from khwaja sira elders to those disciples who were loyal and capable of becoming future community leaders. Refer to Junejo (1994) for more hijra origin stories.

Moreover, the various lineages differed with respect to the occupation, practices, status and/or place of origin of their founding members. According to Soni, a zennana informant, the creation of the zennana circles could be traced back to the Mughal period. Each circle had a differential status. "Marzais are like the kings," she said, "Ravannay are ministers, Muhavtis were messengers, and Chandnis used to roll out carpets." According to Payal, who was a hijra, the ancestors of the *Rai Walay* lineage (or *Raikay*) were known for guiding people to the right path. Among Sindhi hijras, those who placed the saddles on bin Qasim's horses started the Badshehzadi lineage, those who held the reins and walked the horses were Vazirzadis, and the remaining khwaja siras in bin Qasim's army (*lashkar*) founded the Lashkarye lineage. Badshehzadis ranked the highest among Sindhi hijras. For instance, the relationship between Badshehzadis and Vazirzadis was similar to that of kings/princesses (*bādshāh/shehzādī*) and their ministers (*vazīrs*). The name, Badshehzadi, was a combination of the Urdu words *bādshāh* (king) and *shehzādī* (princess), while Vazirzadi was a variant of *vazīr* (minister or political advisor). In practice, this status differential often entitled Badshehzadi khwaja siras to act superior to Vazirzadis. "Typically, we work when we visit each other's homes, but Badshehzadis don't," said Nadia. "They sit like kings, and Vazirzadis come and cook food and serve it to them."

## Historic Residences

Each hijra lineage consisted of several primary residences (*baṛī maṛī*) that were linked to their founders and current chiefs. According to oral histories, some of these residences were over 700 years old, dating back to the Mughal era<sup>46</sup>. The elders of these households were represented by khwaja siras as religious, pious and God-fearing ascetics (*faqīr*). These khwaja siras were said to be strictly against sex-work and other “sinful” activities, and men were rarely allowed to enter their homes. The elders of these residences were known to offer daily prayers and travel to Makkah for holy pilgrimage. Life at the *baṛī maṛīs* was guided by a set of rules and customs that were rarely observed at smaller khwaja sira residences (*deṛā*)<sup>47</sup>. Further, the occupants of the

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<sup>46</sup> Unlike the rentals where most khwaja siras lived, these large residences were owned by khwaja sira chiefs. Each residence was passed down from one generation of elders to another; the head khwaja sira was typically replaced by her oldest cohabitating student upon her death. The inhabitants of the house were not allowed to sell the property since it was an important piece of the lineage’s heritage. The heads of these houses were known to be wealthy, and much of their fortune was inherited from their predecessors. In addition, senior gurus were expected to reciprocate with big mari chiefs by giving them large sums of money out of respect for their seniority (*barāpān*). For instance, Payal told me that she had deliberately avoided meeting Hājī Amber, the chief of the Naguru mari in Karachi, because she was expected to offer her close to Rs. 15,000 on her next visit.

The prosperity of historic homes was evident to me during my visit to a big mari in Lahore. Malka, one of the residents of the house, had invited Payal and I for lunch. Malka was an emasculated khwaja sira who earned a living exclusively through begging. She was one of the few khwaja siras I met during fieldwork who did not engage in sex work. Malka’s living quarter was far more comfortable than the homes of average khwaja siras; her room had an attached bathroom and was equipped with modern amenities, including an air conditioner, microwave, a large flat screen television, DVD player, music system, a refrigerator, a filtered water cooler with an attached mini refrigerator. In addition, the room was fully furnished with wall-to-wall carpeting, window drapes, a queen size bed and a love seat. Malka seemed fairly self-sufficient within the four walls of her room, which was one of many rooms within a large house. Moreover, she wore bangles, a necklace and nose ring made of real gold. Such wealth and luxury, though largely limited to historic residences, contradicted the trope of the impoverished khwaja sira.

<sup>47</sup> According to their strict code of conduct, younger khwaja siras were not allowed to talk back to the elders of the house. In addition, respect was accorded to elders by touching their knees and

houses followed a rigid daily regimen, which involved waking up and going to bed early each day, and earning a modest livelihood strictly through begging and by conferring blessings.

Most respondents claimed being unable to live the disciplined life of the big residences.

Shani echoed this sentiment in her account of the gradual transition from the big mari to the *ḍeṛā*.

Before, there were only big maris, but then slowly smaller residences formed. The thing is that we are a bit modern. We're into movies, songs, dance. They dance too, but in a proper manner. But we are disco dancers. So gradually, the students at the big residences started moving out because there were too many restrictions there. Their boyfriends couldn't visit after a certain time of the day. So, the concept of living separately slowly increased. We started doing dance functions, and giving money to the big gurus to appease them. This way, more and more smaller houses cropped up.

I often heard about these differences between the inhabitants of the big residences and smaller units. Life at the big mari represented ideal *khwaja sira* behavior that was characteristic of the *hijras* of yesteryears and that diverged from the contemporary association of gender ambiguous people with immorality. Many *khwaja siras* aspired to become like the big mari elders in old age. In Chapter 8, I discuss the role of historic residences in *khwaja sira* activism, where the image of the virtuous lifestyle of big mari residents was projected widely to counter public claims about *khwaja sira* immorality.

## **Conclusion**

Chapter 2 expounded what *khwaja sira* meant in medieval India. This chapter has highlighted the meanings of *khwaja sira* from the perspective of those who identified as such in contemporary Pakistan. Although present-day *khwaja siras* viewed royal eunuchs as their predecessors, the historical record indicates that the *khwaja siras* of the Mughal era, despite superficial overlaps,

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through the practice of *salām*. *Salām*, translates into 'peace' in Arabic and is commonly used as a greeting by Muslims. Disciples said *salām* to elders when given their share of earnings, when lights were switched on at sunset, while stepping out of bathrooms, and while sitting and getting up.



were fundamentally different from their contemporaries. Not only were the socioeconomic conditions and cultural practices surrounding their emasculation vastly different, but also they were corporeally and sexually distinct<sup>48</sup>.

Although gender ambiguous people variously understood khwaja sira, as an umbrella category, it subsumed a range of overlapping sub-identities and non-normative gender/sexual subjectivities. This chapter has focused on the corporeality and the gendered/sexual desires and practices of khwaja siras as well as the foundations of their social structure. The details provided here will illuminate in later chapters that the ground realities of khwaja siras, particularly with regards to their corporeality and sexuality, did not always coincide with their self and group representations in interactions with ordinary people. It has also highlighted a crucial feature of their identity (i.e., hijraness), which was vital to their deceptive game-like interactions with and survival in mainstream society.

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<sup>48</sup> Unlike imperial eunuchs, present-day khwaja siras were not enmeshed in a culture of slavery where they were forcibly emasculated and sold as slaves. Moreover, there is no archival evidence indicating that royal eunuchs possessed a feminine soul or that they were sexually attracted to men.

## Chapter 4: Stigma, Ambiguity and Conflict

Ma Nadi was a godly khwaja sira. She was a khwaja sira by birth, and was well known for her dancing abilities. During the time of kings, she used to go to the palace and there she would dance in a veil. The king was so happy with her performance that he invited her to a celebration. But on the day of the event she fell ill and could not go. But some other zennana went instead of her. He wore a veil and danced in front of the king, and the king gave him a gift. Later when the king sent Ma Nadi his thanks, she said that she didn't even go to dance. The King was furious when he found out that an imposter had danced in front of him, and he told his army to go after him. The zennana hid in a field and there he cut off his genitals with a sharp sugarcane leaf. He became nirbān. From that time on, the custom of becoming nirbān started. Ma Nadi was shocked at what the zennana had done. She was mortified that such things had started to happen. She was so upset that she wanted to be buried alive. She prayed that the ground would explode and pull her in. As the ground began to explode and she started to descend into it, the nirbān khwaja sira grabbed her scarf and said, "At least tell me how I can heal my wounds," and she responded, "Oil and water. Oil and water." Then the murat let go of the scarf and Ma Nadi disappeared into the ground. She did not accept the murat, and instead she buried herself when she saw what the murat had done. But this also shows that nirbāns are blessed by Ma Nadi. A lot of people are afraid of cutting off their penis because they can die from it. But they still do it because they believe that they have Ma Nadi's blessings.

Recounted by Nadia, this narrative is a version of an origin story, centering on Ma Nadi (also known as Mai Nandi), a revered pre-Mughal era khwaja sira from the Subcontinent to whom gender ambiguous people traced their roots<sup>49</sup>. Her legend is closely intertwined with contemporary khwaja sira beliefs and practices, particularly to those related to genital excision and issues of authenticity. Importantly, the fable indicates that the very origins of khwaja siras were entrenched in stigma, ambiguity, and internal fragmentation.

The paradox presented by the fable is that even though Ma Nadi condemned emasculation, she also prescribed remedial measures to those who excised their genitals. Khwaja siras believed that Ma Nadi would not have recommended the oil and water treatment had she

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<sup>49</sup> Variations of this origin story appear among hijra communities across South Asia. For instance, in his study of Bangladeshi hijras, Hossain recounts a very different origin myth involving an ancient hijra goddess known as Maya Ji (2012, 505), and yet aspects of this legend overlap with Nadia's narrative.

not wanted the zennana to heal. In fact, her suggestion enabled the practice to persist. Her dubious actions indicate that emasculation was a stigmatized yet condoned practiced. Implicit in the story is also the discourse of real versus fake khwaja siras. The narrative suggests that khunsas were deserving ascetics, hijras were condemned yet legitimate alms receivers, and zennanas were imposters worthy of being chased and punished. This origin myth sets the tone for many of the present-day struggles between khwaja siras.

This chapter focuses on stigma and its impact on khwaja siras and on their relationships with one another. I argue that stigma produced states of ambiguity and conflict within the khwaja sira social system. Goffman writes that the beliefs of mainstream society instruct the stigmatized person on how to feel about and treat those who diverge from the norm (1963, 111). Similar to the effects of internalized homophobia (Harrison 2013, 20), khwaja siras were often given to self-doubt and revulsion towards their own kind. They regularly discriminated against other gender ambiguous people and sexual minorities on the basis of the dominant beliefs they endorsed. Moreover, they were constantly plagued with self-stigma and by ambiguities that were deeply embedded within their belief system, and that aroused uncertainties about their core practices.

### **Being Khwaja Sira and Muslim**

In public spaces, khwaja siras came across as self-assured, loud-mouthed and high-spirited people who enjoyed drawing attention to themselves. But underneath this playful and seemingly self-confident exterior were individuals who harbored ambivalences and insecurities about their place in Islam. This condition of ambiguity in part reflects the broader failure to achieve consensus on Islam in Pakistan, and the unending confusion resulting from it in the political

sphere (Khan 2013, 5). Although religion provided solace, it also produced in khwaja siras misgivings about the validity of their gender/sexual difference. Consequently, gender ambiguous people questioned the legitimacy of their own claims about possessing a feminine soul, and tended to give credence to dominant Islamic views that were regularly used to stigmatize them.

### Role of Religion in Life

Few khwaja siras were able to observe religious practices in everyday life. “Praise to God, I am Muslim,” said Chammo. “But I am not very religious because my work is bad. I engage in every sin. I sell my body, and I stay in a state of impurity.” Khwaja siras like Chammo distanced themselves from religious observance because their daily lives were engulfed in religiously prohibited behavior.

If you think about it, really we are men, but we wear women's clothes. Prayers are not permitted in these clothes. Often the clerics who preach tell us that men are not allowed to say prayers in women's clothes. There should be no nail polish on your nails, and your nails should not be long. But our khadras love their bodies, their beauty, and they live by taking care of each and every thing of theirs. They have to keep long nails, but if your nails are long, then your prayers are not granted.

Above, Sunaina justifies her avoidance of daily prayer while indorsing the dominant view that gender ambiguous people with male genitals were men. For Sunaina and Chammo, it was futile to be simultaneously religious and a part of the khwaja sira universe.

This general attitude explains why many khwaja siras got married, had children, and left the field for a normative life upon retirement. “I have a problem being this way,” said Andaaz, who was clearly discontent with her lifestyle and a desired normalcy. “I want to earn enough so that I can stop doing this work and start supporting my family the right way.” Unhappy with her present state, she aspired to leave the field in order to begin leading a virtuous lifestyle. It was only upon permanently abandoning the field that she believed she could become a devout

Muslim. Although most gender ambiguous people turned to religion in old age, some left the field and turned to religion in their youth. Below, Tamanna describes her guru's estrangement from the field as a result of religious influences.

I used to have this guru before but now she's kept a beard and has joined a *Tabligh*<sup>50</sup>. She has completely left the field. Now you'll find her at a mosque in Lalu Khet. She's stopped meeting me. She says that I am bad company for her. Now she only hangs out with this group of Tablighi murats. They go to the homes of other murats to spread their religious message. They came to my house too the other day. All of them had these big beards, but they were very feminine. I said to them, "Come you whores, first I want each of you to dance for me." They started clapping at me and said, "Come with us to Tabligh. God willing, He will help you." Everyone at the mosque knows about them, and they're very happy that they've left a bad line and joined a good one.

This rare narrative about religious reformation among khwaja siras demonstrates not only the efficacy of grassroots Islamic activism in Pakistan but also the controlling influence of religion over khwaja sira desire and practice.

Only a handful of informants reported engaging in religious performance. Nazo, for instance, attended Friday prayers in the neighborhood mosque and held weekly Quranic recitations at her house. For Nazo, observing Islamic rituals served the dual function of earning both divine merit and social respectability. Despite being generally dislocated from Islam, certain religious practices were regularly observed by khwaja siras, and some had even become institutionalized within the field. One of these was the practice of performing the Muslim holy pilgrimage to Makkah in Saudi Arabia<sup>51</sup>. Upon their return, khwaja sira pilgrims were honored with the title of *hājī*<sup>52</sup>, which was added to their feminine names (e.g., Hājī Salma, Hājī Bunty). Earning the title of *hājī* improved the status of gender ambiguous people both among khwaja siras and in mainstream society.

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<sup>50</sup> Tabligh refers to a religious movement vested in spreading the message of Islam at the grassroots level.

<sup>51</sup> Khwaja siras perform hajj as men.

<sup>52</sup> Hājī is a form of address for someone who has performed Hajj.

In addition, khwaja siras regularly organized *niāz*, a religious offering involving the distribution of food. Gender ambiguous people who performed group blessings (see “Livelihood” in Chapter 5) put aside a small portion of their earnings for *niāz* before dividing the remaining amount into equal shares among group members. Typically, gurus collected the contributions and put the money towards hosting *niāz*. Food was either cooked or bought, and then distributed among khwaja sira guests and the poor<sup>53</sup>. Gender ambiguous people also made routine visits to the shrines of Sufi saints. Although worship was the primary goal of shrine visits, they also presented opportunities to earn supplementary income through dancing and sex work. I noticed that a number of khwaja siras had hung in their homes posters of the saints they worshipped. Surkhi, for instance, had put up a poster of Abdul Qadir Jilani, for whom she lit incense and performed weekly *niāz*.



**Figure 7.** A khwaja sira dancing to the beat of the drum at Lal Shahbaz Qalandar’s shrine in Sehwan, Sindh.

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<sup>53</sup> Khwaja siras organized *niāz* on special occasions, such as Prophet Mohammad’s birthday or on the day of ‘*Ashūrhā*. The day of ‘*Ashūrhā* refers to the 10<sup>th</sup> of the Islamic month of Muharram, in which Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad. In addition, *niāz* was offered in the name of God and certain venerated Sufi saints, such as, Abdul Qadir Jilani, who is widely revered in Pakistan and India.

### Khwaja Siras and Popular Islam

Informants voiced several religious accounts that ranged from outright rejection of khwaja siras to uncertainty about their status in Islam. The presence of these varied religious beliefs rests on Islam's diversity within Pakistan, which includes a significant Shi'ite minority, many Ismailis, different Sufi traditions, and "traditionalist" communities that belong to various ethnolinguistic groups (Haines 2012, 13). This diversity is represented in khwaja siras' religious views pertaining to their place in Islam. Below, Moti's staunch views leave little room for any religious approval of gender ambiguous people.

[W]earing women's clothes is not allowed for men. I read a hadīth on a calendar that our Prophet cursed those men who wore women's clothes. There was a person who wore a red colored outfit once, and Prophet Mohammed ordered him to be removed from the neighborhood. In the Quran, God has said that khwaja siras are His beings and they should not be treated badly, but the Quran refers only to those khwaja siras who are naturally born. God has sent us in the form of men. He hasn't sent us as with mixed parts. And the prophet has declared singing and dancing as haram. I heard a cleric say on a religious channel that giving money to hijras is forbidden because they earn a living by singing and dancing which is also forbidden.

Moti's claim that Islam does not permit men to dress in women's clothes diverges from the scholarly interpretation of this hadīth presented by religious historian, Scott Kugle. According to Kugle, Prophet Mohammad's condemnation applied specifically to males who were not effeminate by nature and adopted such behavior merely for ulterior motives (Kugle 2010, 253-4). Moti had the tendency of adhering to the normative gender binary where individuals born with male genitalia were deemed to be men even if they believed that they possessed a feminine soul. This dominant view privileged genitalia over interiorized gender in determining whether a person was a man, woman or intersexual.

Even though gender ambiguous people believed their condition to be innate, God-given and permanent, dominant religious beliefs about sex/gender often led them to question their

views about the concept of the feminine soul. “I think, to say that we have a feminine soul is our own belief,” said Moti. “God has only descended two types of beings-- man and woman.” Moti suggests that khwaja siras had conjured up the notion of a feminine soul for personal satisfaction when in fact Islam did not recognize its existence. Her self-denial is a product of the failure of Sunni jurists to develop the concept of gender identity independent of biological sex. The social and religious stigma that khwaja siras experienced often led them to question the validity of their own claims about possessing a feminine soul. The fact that this soul was intangible, that its presence and legitimacy were not recognized by dominant Islamic precepts, compounded by the absence of adequate medical discourse in Pakistan describing gender variance and dysphoria in positive terms, generated momentary lapses of denial and self-doubt among zennanas and hijras. To deem the soul an imagined phenomenon, was to deny that gender ambiguous people existed, and according to this view, those who claimed to be khwaja siras should live in harmony with the norms attributed to their given bodies.

However, unlike Moti, most interlocutors were unsure about their location in Islam. Their responses revealed the paradox of their lives, signaling the contradiction between religious teachings and the reality of their existence.

Hajra: There is no mention of khwaja siras in the Quran, but Allah has made us this way. There are many things that Allah has made but not mentioned in the Quran.

Bilal: If you look at hadīth, for a man to become a woman is a sin. But khwaja siras also have a great place in Islam. Our prayers and curses have an effect on others. Sometimes Allah listens to things that come from the heart, even if they come from the heart of a sinner.

Ruby: We are men but we have the hearts of women. We are like living corpses. According to Islam, it is prohibited for us to be the way we are, but we are this way because God has made us like this.

The above responses highlight the internal conflict experienced by gender ambiguous people



between their gendered/sexual desires, on the one hand, and the conviction that such behavior was prohibited in Islam, on the other. The implication of this worldview was that khwaja siras must suppress their desires and live like men if they wished to avoid a life of sin and disgrace. Importantly, these interlocutors attributed their gender difference to divine will even though they believed that it was a sin “for a man to become a woman.”

Hasi presented two religious narratives, one that outright denounced non-normative sexual behavior, while the other reflected an unclear view of gender ambiguity.

I have heard a hadīth in which Prophet Mohammad was going somewhere when he saw the funeral procession of a shemale. When he asked whose funeral it was, the people in the procession took off the cloth from the deceased’s face. The Prophet turned his face away when he saw the “shemale.” He didn’t say anything and motioned to continue the procession. He didn’t tell them to stop the procession...or that it is not legitimate. I have also heard that the people of Prophet Nuh wanted to have sex with boys even though they had beautiful women among them. I won’t call these boys shemales, but technically shemales are boys too. Whenever they saw beautiful boys, they went after them. That community received God’s punishment. Stormy winds blew them into the sky where they collided with each other and their livers blew up.

The second account clearly condemns sex between men, or according to Hasi, sex between individuals born with male genitalia. However, the first narrative evokes a sense of ambivalence about the status of khwaja siras in Islam. Although that act of looking away from the deceased’s face could be interpreted as a sign of revulsion, Prophet Mohammad also appeared to have sanctioned the funeral. The incident suggests a reluctant acceptance of gender variant people, as despised yet tolerated beings.

Historical sources reveal that eunuchs served important functions at the Ka’ba, the sacred site of pilgrimage for Muslims in Makkah, and at the Mosque of Prophet Mohammad in Medina, where they were employed. Some sources claim that eunuchs still serve the mosque in Makkah, but they are fewer in number today than in the early 1900s. Informants frequently mentioned these individuals and saw them as their “khwaja sira ancestors.” However, they knew little about

these eunuchs other than the role they played in the ritual purification of the holy sites. Further, they had varying ideas about who these people were. Many believed that they were intersexuals, while others were skeptical about the possibility that such people worked at Muslim sacred sites.

You know how khwaja siras talk about the by-birth khwaja siras in Makkah and Medina, and this and that. God only knows what is true. But this one time an elderly khwaja sira told me that there was a tribe of khwaja siras over there, and they had a ritual in which they used to operate on a child and make him nirbān as soon as he was born. This way, she could grow up to protect the house of God. Now if the people of the house of Allah are doing this, then why would it be wrong for us to do it? In a way, they are the same sex as us, but they may not have a feminine soul.

Nadia was not convinced that khwaja siras even existed at Muslim holy sites partly because she had heard inconsistent accounts about their corporeality. She was uncertain whether they were intersexual or physically emasculated, and she doubted that they possessed a feminine soul.

Similarly, Kugle notes that the eunuchs of the pre-modern period were only superficially similar to hijras in terms of somatic emasculation; they were involuntarily enslaved, emasculated and sold into the Muslim Empire, while hijras demonstrate a psychological motivation to willingly undergo emasculation (2010, 241-42). Regardless of whether or not eunuchs were ancestors of contemporary khwaja siras, Nadia drew solace in the possibility that “the people of the house of Allah” performed genital excision since such a practice challenged the popular belief in Pakistan that voluntary somatic emasculation was religiously prohibited.

The following narrative, recounted by a khwaja sira elder, describes the legend of a hijra who was linked to the Sufi saint, Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishty<sup>54</sup>.

A long time ago in Ajmer, a hijra asked Khwaja Gharib Nawaz for a child instead of guidance. Khwaja said that you will have a child but you won’t be able to see it. “Why?” she asked, and he said, “Because you didn’t ask for it--you asked for a child.” Then he

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<sup>54</sup> Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishty (1142-1236 A.D.), also known as, Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, was the founder of the Chishty Sufi Order in India. Today, hijras attend the annual death anniversary of Khwaja Garib Nawaz in larger numbers, and it is believed that he gave hijras the power to bless.

asked her to go to Taragarh<sup>55</sup>. He told her to stay there until she has a child. So she went there and hit the mountain, and the mountain opened. When she went inside, there was a pond there. She put her legs into the pond and it dried up. There was also a marble floor that was filled with flowers. She lay down on the marble and the mountain closed. Then nine months passed and her child was about to be born when the angels came down. The hijra passed away because she asked for a child but she didn't have a passage. But the child lived. Khwaja Gharib Nawaz went to the mountain. He took the child and placed it outside the mountain. When people found out that a hijra had given birth to a child in the mountain, they went to the mountain. But men were not allowed there, so the men left and the women stayed back and prayed. And those who were childless, Allah gave them a child. Then the mountain opened again, and the child went back in and into the mother's womb, and the mountain closed again. Today, women who are unable to have children go to this mountain. The hijra's shrine is in Ajmer. First, people greet the hijra's grave and then they say *salām* to Khwaja Gharib Nawaz. So this shows the respect that is given to hijras, but only if they are good and don't get ass fucked. It is due to the Godly hijras of the past that we are still eating today.

The above fable is vague about the status of khwaja siras. On the one hand, it demonstrates the hijra's imprudence for pursuing her material needs over the saint's spiritual guidance, which ultimately led to her death. On the other hand, it indicates the respect accorded to the hijra by devotees who paid her homage by visiting her shrine. Moreover, the narrator emphasizes that only khwaja sira ascetics and those who abstained from sin and debauchery were worthy of respect and high stature in Islam. The aforementioned religio-historical incidents indicate that khwaja siras were suspended in a perpetual state of ambiguity about their location in Islam.

### Internal Conflicts

The internal conflicts experienced by gender ambiguous people due to their divergence from religious norms produced in them a deep sense of despondency and confusion. The following excerpt from Nazo's interview demonstrates her struggle to reconcile her religious beliefs with her queerness.

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<sup>55</sup> Taragarh is a fort close to Ajmer in Rajasthan, India.

A lot of people say that we do this deliberately, that we are men... I have been reading the Quran regularly for so many years. If I had been deliberately putting up an act, I would have been fixed by now. But maybe it is not working because I read the Quran in women's clothes, and it is wrong for us to worship in women's clothes. But it is my faith that Allah will forgive each and every human being.

On the one hand, Nazo asserts her gender difference in defiance of the mainstream belief that some gender ambiguous people were fake khwaja siras. On the other hand, she speculates whether her religious observances had been invalidated by the act of praying in women's attire. I was about to wrap up the interview with Nazo when darkness descended upon her room due to a scheduled power outage. It was late in the evening and Nazo sat across from me on the floor. An emergency lamp placed next to her lit up her face from below. Suddenly, she narrowed her eyes and leaned forward, pointing at her lipstick covered lips. "What is this?" she inquired. "Look at my face! This lipstick. These clothes I'm wearing. What do you think this is?" After a moment's pause she blurted: "This is the devil! You think this is a woman sitting in front of you? No! This is Satan! Khwaja siras are like Satan!" A couple of minutes later, I scrambled out of Nazo's house alarmed by her sudden outburst. Nazo was clearly conflicted about her religious beliefs and gender identity. Religion and respectability were crucial to her everyday life, but she was also unable to suppress her khwaja sira identity and desires. Her inability to reconcile the two conflicting facets of her life affected her psychological well-being.

### Sin and Reconciliation

Khwaja sira notions of morality were rooted in dominant social norms that were used to stigmatize them. Gender ambiguous people identified both sex work and illegitimate sex (i.e., anal penetration) as vice or *burāī*. However, sex work was considered to be acceptable in situations of dire financial need. "I am fine with those who sell their bodies to support their

families if they are unemployed, helpless and depressed,” said Shani. Many khwaja siras feared the negative consequences of earning religious demerit through sex work. “God forbid I do sex work and then bring that money to my siblings. I don’t want something bad to happen to my family,” said Nisho. “They say, if you do bad things, then it will come to hurt your children too.” Moreover, monogamous relations with male partners were acceptable relative to sex with multiple partners.

Khwaja siras identified a number of other activities in which they engaged as immoral. Genital excision was believed to be against divine will, that is, voluntarily changing the form that God intended for human beings was a grave sin. “All the things that God has made and given us are God’s possessions,” said Saleem “This leg isn’t just a leg-- it is Allah’s bounty. So I can’t cut it off. Of course, it’s different if I lose my leg in an accident.” I was told by khwaja siras and ordinary people alike that altering one’s corporeal structure was like “playing with nature,” and that those who engaged in this “satanic deed” were “at war with God” because they “challenge[d] Allah for the sake of personal desires.” Importantly, the decision to become emasculated was believed to be tantamount to renouncing Islam since the prayers of such people were considered unmeritorious. “The funeral rites of those who are nirbān are not considered legitimate in Islam,” said Nadia, which meant that they remained in a state of liminality even upon death. Sherry explained emasculation as a much bigger vice than sex work since there was no restitution from its permanent state. “As it is, I am detached from Islam because I do bad work. If I become nirbān, I will be completely cut off from Islam.” This religious understanding of sex/gender conflated biological sex and interiorized gender, and privileged natural physical constitution in determining gender identity.

Further, begging was looked down upon as a religiously forbidden activity, but one that was tolerable in times of dire necessity. “According to shariáh, begging is prohibited,” said Saleem. “It is not allowed for him who is able to make ends meet. Now, obviously, if a person does not have money to eat and clothe himself, then what else is he to do?” Saleem’s views pertaining to begging were reasonable yet ambiguous; the Islamic rules pertaining to begging left room for the practice to persist while simultaneously producing uncertainty about its legitimacy. Many also believed that for men to adorn women’s clothes was not permitted in Islam. Hence, practically every crucial aspect of being a khwaja sira was believed to be religiously prohibited. Unable to repress their gender/sexual variance, the daily lives of khwaja siras were burdened by these socio-religious pressures.

Khwaja siras engaged in a variety of activities to offset their sins. In addition to the practice of organizing religious offerings, performing the Muslim holy pilgrimage to Makkah, and regular shrine visits, some khwaja siras established distance from sex work as a way of countering vice<sup>56</sup>. Others entered monogamous relationships with men who financially supported them, thereby replacing the need to earn by selling sex. Another way of reconciling one’s queerness with religion was by getting married and reproducing in order to satisfy the expectation of expanding the Muslim *Ummah*<sup>57</sup> and making a personal sacrifice for the greater social good. In contrast, some khwaja siras defied oppressive beliefs by asserting that their feminine soul was natural, God-given and permanent. “If God has put this rūh in us then that means it is God’s will,” said Bao. “I am grateful that Allah gave me this soul instead of making

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<sup>56</sup> Upon achieving some financial stability, many khwaja siras left sex work as a full-time profession for more respectable livelihood options, such as blessing and begging, and resorted to sex work only when they were unable to make ends meet.

<sup>57</sup> In Arabic, Ummah means nation or community, and it refers to the network of Muslims the world over.

me an invalid.” Similarly, Shani stated that, “God tells us to love everything that He has created. I am living my life by this sentence. God has created us, so we should love khwaja siras just the way we love other people.”

I wondered if reconciliation was easier for emasculated khwaja siras in light of the fact that sex-reassignment was legally and religiously permitted in some Muslim countries. One March evening, I asked Naima, Payal and Nadia about their views on sex change operations in Iran. Initially, the three of them seemed confused, but then Payal recollected hearing that such surgeries were legal in Iran. I went on explain that SRS was legal and religiously sanctioned in Iran, and that the Iranian state partially covered the cost of the procedure. As I spoke, Payal nodded in agreement, but both Naima and Nadia seemed bewildered. Naima knew little about Iran let alone the country’s stance on sex reassignment. She asked where Iran was located and Payal explained that it is a neighboring Muslim country where people from Pakistan pilgrimaged to well-known shrines. At the end of this discussion, both Naima and Nadia appeared pensive. Although Payal had some knowledge about the topic, which she had only recently acquired through discussions with activists, Naima and Nadia knew nothing about sex change in Iran. Hence, Iran’s treatment of SRS was not a point of reconciliation for most khwaja siras because in their worldview, localized knowledge, as is often the case, was privileged over everything else.

### **Khwaja Siras and Public Perception**

This section explores how contemporary forms of khwaja sira experience were understood in mainstream Pakistani society. It highlights the mixed public perception towards khwaja siras, and explains why gender ambiguous people were concurrently revered, tolerated and persecuted. One September afternoon, I accompanied Payal and Ruby to Zainab Market where the two planned on shopping for new outfits. Forty-eight year old Payal was dressed demurely in

women's shalvār qamīz with a scarf draped around her neck, and her hair tied in a neat bun in the back of her head. In contrast, thirty-three year old Ruby was dressed in a striped bright blue men's shalvār qamīz. Ruby wore a locket around her neck and left her golden-streaked shoulder length hair open.

Compared to Payal's modest demeanor, Ruby's flamboyance attracted the attention of passersby. I felt strangely invisible walking next to Ruby since all eyes were on her. We stopped at a shop that was being run by a bunch of teenaged boys. As Ruby browsed through outfits, the shopkeepers started fooling around. They teased one of boys in the group to befriend Ruby. Upon hearing their banter, Ruby flirtatiously responded, "God forbid I become his friend!" The playful repartee continued until we moved to the next shop. As we made our way out onto the sidewalk, I noticed a trio of young professional men pointing and laughing at Ruby. I was momentarily stunned when one of them pretended to grab Ruby's buttocks as she turned to face a shop display window. Unaware, Ruby admired a dress on a mannequin as the men walked away high-fiving and laughing. As we waited at a busy intersection to cross the street, I noticed two policemen drinking from a public water cooler. Upon seeing us, one of them approached Payal and served her a glass of water. Payal thanked them, drank the water and then handed the glass to Ruby. One of policemen respectfully requested Payal to pray for the well-being of his ailing mother. In response, Payal uttered, "I pray to Allah to heal your mother so that she recovers soon." The policeman politely thanked her as we parted ways with them.

It was interesting to observe Payal and Ruby's interactions with the people at the bazaar. There was a marked difference in the way people treated the two khwaja siras. This difference in interaction is partly attributable to the visual markers the two provided their onlookers. Taking a lead from Payal's simplicity and Ruby's flamboyance, the spectators revered Payal as an ascetic



with special powers while treating Ruby as an object of entertainment and desire. That a khwaja sira could be both a spiritual intermediary and a sex object is confounding. Further, the inconsistent treatment of khwaja siras indicates the diversity and contradictions in the public's perception of gender ambiguous people. It demonstrates that an array of conflicting ideas permeated the Pakistani public, which was a fractured entity comprised of multiple publics. That khwaja siras concomitantly experienced acceptance, social distancing, outright rejection and violence was evidence of the coexistence of these publics and of their ambivalence towards non-normative subjects.

Public perceptions pertaining to khwaja siras were enduring but they emerged ephemerally in discursive and transient moments (e.g., in khwaja sira encounters with the media, or with ordinary people out on the streets). These mixed opinions were products of the gender nonconformity, somatic ambiguity, hyper sexuality, and clandestine culture of khwaja siras. There was an air of uncertainty surrounding their lives, unanswered questions, and myths and urban legends. To borrow from Susan Seizer, khwaja siras were “seen as most unsettling precisely due to their unsettledness” (2000, 235). Here, I extrapolate from public perceptions pertaining to khwaja siras in three ways: through an examination of gender ambiguous people's assessment of how they were viewed by worldly people, through my personal conversations with ordinary Pakistanis, and through an analysis of mass-mediated messages.

One morning over tea at the AIPS rest house in Lahore, I had a telling conversation about khwaja siras with two men: my driver, Alam, and the center's cook, Sadiq. In the excerpt below, Alam contends that only those with ambiguous genitalia should be called khwaja siras.

**Alam:** I know that many of them aren't even khwaja siras. I know of this one person who is just like a khwaja sira in how he walks and talks, but he also has a wife and children.

**Faris:** Yes, it's true that many of them are married and have children.

**Alam:** But then they're not khwaja siras.

**Faris:** See, there are several types of khwaja siras. The general public doesn't accept all of them, but they claim that they are indeed khwaja siras.

**Alam:** In my view, only those who are naturally born khwaja siras, are khwaja siras. Only they deserve to be given money. God has made them that way, so it is their right to beg.

**Faris:** The people who you are referring to are known as khunsā-e-mushkil. But then there are also those who are physically male but from within they feel that they are women, and there are also women who feel that they are men.

**Alam:** The people you're describing are not khwaja siras. They are zennanas and khusrahs.

**Sadiq:** I think they are all human beings and God has made them the way they are so we shouldn't tease them.

**Alam:** I wouldn't call such people khwaja siras. They have simply made this into a profession. They should live like men. Why can't they earn a living like ordinary people?

**Faris:** Many of them do, but they are unable to keep their jobs because those who they work with ridicule and oppress them, and they eventually leave these jobs.

**Alam:** Yeah, that's because of their own behavior.

**Faris:** I'm sure they sometimes do things that offend other people, but they can't change their feminine way of walking and talking. The problem is the way society treats them. Society does not let them live like ordinary people.

Alam and Sadiq exhibited mixed and conflicting opinions about khwaja siras. Alam's views were hardly surprising. He knew more about khwaja siras than most lay people (e.g., that some get married and raise families), yet he subscribed to the dominant definition of khwaja sira as an intersexual person. Alam held moralistic views that were intolerant of religiously unrecognized gender differences. Moreover, he believed that "normal" men with functioning male genitalia tended to pose as khwaja siras merely as a livelihood practice.

In contrast, Sadiq represented an alternative public, one that was unclear about yet compassionate towards gender ambiguous people. While Sadiq feared the power of the khwaja sira curse, Alam criticized it as nonsense. Importantly, my explanation that khwaja siras included individuals who felt feminine from within did not resonate with him. The only condition that Alam considered legitimate was the intersex one, which, unlike the feminine soul, was a visible

manifestation of God's creation in human beings<sup>58</sup>. Alam's views embodied the mainstream understanding of who khwaja siras were and/or should be.

The diversity of opinions about khwaja siras was reinforced through mass media. Media representations roughly categorized gender ambiguous people in three ways: as immoral, humorous, or sympathetic. Often media outlets demonized and misconstrued information about gender ambiguous people. In 2009, an investigative television program called *Sach Ka Safar* (The Search for Truth) on NewsOne TV negatively portrayed zennanas and hijras. The host of the show interpreted the sexual relationship between khwaja siras and their male clients as "homosexual" (*hamjins*) behavior when he discovered that most gender ambiguous people were biologically male. He referred to murats as "ordinary men" (*āche khāse mard*) and equated their sexual behavior to homosexuality: "The government will seriously have to think about this issue otherwise the army of gays that is developing under the guise of murats will spread AIDS, hepatitis, cancer and other sexually transmitted diseases in our society." The host conflated gay with murat, which was largely inaccurate but also partially true since overlaps between the two identity categories tended to occur among certain individuals who situationally identified as both. Moreover, he painted a terrifying picture of the consequences of allowing homosexual activity to persist. By using the term "gays" and juxtaposing it with AIDS, the host implied that the phenomena unfolding in Pakistan (i.e., gays and AIDS) were foreign forces from which the

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<sup>58</sup> A short survey conducted on the campus of Peshawar University yielded similar results. The research participants, which included the institution's faculty members, were asked to describe their understanding of the term "hijra." The results revealed that 33% of participants believed that hijras were "asexual," 25% said "hermaphrodites," 14% considered them "half man half woman," another 14% said "mentally disturbed," 10% said "impotent," and about 8% said "homosexual" (Haider 2008, 14). Despite the limitations of the study, the findings illustrate the extent of uncertainty about gender ambiguous people even among scholars. Importantly, the percentage of respondents who said "hermaphrodites" would have been higher had the study included individuals from other class and educational backgrounds and/or asked them to define "khwaja sira" instead of hijra.

country must be protected.

Further, the show presented a negative image of the guru-celā system. The guru was depicted as someone who used murats as a source of personal income and turned them into sex workers. A guru's house was portrayed as a sinful space where the norms of society were inverted, where homosexual acts took place, and where drugs and alcohol were readily available. "Homosexuality might be illegal on paper but it is not so in reality," said the host. "The truth is that a lot of homosexual men in Pakistan known as giryās have gotten married to hijras." On the basis of their assigned sex and corresponding sexual behavior, the host misconstrued both khwaja siras and giryās as homosexual men, and sensationalized their relationships by equating them to marriages. In addition, the presenter criminalized the practice of physical emasculation. He claimed that to become nirbān was "to make a male non-male" and "to murder masculinity" which was an "unforgivable crime." Further, he referred to those who performed the procedure as "murderers of humanity." The host of the show recommended that suitable punishments be determined for doctors who performed such procedures, for gurus who persuaded "beautiful young boys" to undergo these operations, and for murats who became emasculated.

Negative portrayals of khwaja siras also circulated through Urdu and English language newspapers<sup>59</sup>. The following piece was published on January 14, 2007 in an Urdu newspaper called Daily Express. The article discussed the expert medical opinion of a psychiatrist named, Dr. Syed Haroon. In it he states that some boys are raised in environments where they begin to adopt women's habits, particularly in cases where the father is less present.

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<sup>59</sup> The English language press in Pakistan conflated and interchangeably used a gamut of terms for gender ambiguous people, including eunuch, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, hijra, effeminate men, etc. However, these terms were rarely scrutinized, and the audience's understanding was often assumed. The general presumption remained that a khwaja sira was an intersexual or an impotent person even though 'normal' men who were capable of reproduction (i.e., *achay-khasay mard*) tended to join their ranks.

Transgenders are people who adopt the appearance of women. It is an odd thing for a young man to say that he has a feminine soul within him. Many of them are drawn towards sex. They used to live separately and secretly, but they are beginning to affect our society now that it is easier for them to reach the general public. They are uneducated and they do not have a position in society. Some people associate with them when they see khwaja siras standing at traffic circles and intersections. The threat of AIDS is also increasing due to this.

Although the language used in the piece does not demonize khwaja siras, it holds them responsible for spreading social ills, such as disease and immorality, and presents them as a looming threat to respectable society.

In addition to their depiction as sinful and immoral beings, khwaja siras were represented as comical figures on television and film. In 2010, ARY News presented a news package about a wedding between a khwaja sira and her lover. The news clip opened with a series of quick shots of khwaja siras being escorted into a police station and being put behind bars. As these images filled the screen, the classic Bollywood song “*Jis ki bivi*” from the 1981 film, *Laawaris*, featuring a cross-dressed Amitabh Bachan, played in the background. The whimsical song set the tone for what was a decidedly a humorous situation: the wedding of a khwaja sira and the subsequent arrest of the wedding participants. The unfeasibility of such a wedding was partly what made it amusing. The news anchor enhanced the comicality of the incident through his derisive style of reporting.

And he whose wife is a khwaja sira has very big name. Yes, we are talking about Malik Iqbal of Peshawar. He has been married twice prior to this, but in marrying a khwaja sira he has become famous... Sick and tired of dealing with bomb blasts and terrorism, even police officials appeared to be happy during this investigation. The police put a garland of flowers around the bride's neck and welcomed her into the police station. In addition to the bride and groom and a dozen khwaja siras, forty-two wedding guests were also arrested... What will become of this wedding will only be determined after the court's ruling. But after seeing the condition of this wedding it can be said that either the population of women has declined or the intelligence of men in the country.

Although the anchor used the term khwaja sira to refer to the subjects of the report, the meaning

of the term remains unclear. The rules pertaining to the marriage of intersexual people differ across the various schools of Islamic thought for the different conditions of intersexuality, where some schools permit individuals with certain kinds of genital anomaly to marry while others do not (Cilardo 1986). These rules and the different types of hermaphroditic states were not common knowledge, and the prevalent belief was that real khwaja siras were incapable of marriage since they lacked the genital capacity to reproduce. Alternatively, for a fake khwaja sira (i.e., a man) to marry a man was not only sinful but also unviable since the union of same-sex individuals could not facilitate reproduction, which was perceived as the foundation of marriage. Hence, the legal, religious and social impossibility of such a union rendered it humorous.

In 2011, Geo News covered a brawl that took place at a khwaja sira's birthday party in Sheikhpura, Punjab. According to the report, the fight started when Rawalpindi's famous khwaja sira, Ruby, made a grand entrance at the event. Her rival, Kashmala, was unable to tolerate Ruby's arrogance, and the two began to physically assault one another after a heated exchange of words. The dispute finally ended when their gurus intervened, and the festivities resumed following reconciliation between Ruby and Kashmala. The reasons for the dispute as cited in the report were at best superficial since the basis of the quarrel was less relevant to the coverage than the footage of the fight itself. The frenetic episode, broadcasted nationwide, was meant to operate at the level of spectacle for the sole purpose of entertaining viewers for whom hijras and zennanas have historically served as a form of amusement. While the news worthiness of this report is questionable, its entertainment value is evident in the shots of the seductive dancing of khwaja siras interspersed with scenes of them physically abusing one another.

However, the public's perception of khwaja siras was not entirely negative, and the vitriol views against and humorous representations of them were often countered by tolerant

viewpoints. An example of this is ARY's Urdu drama serial *Moorat* (2005)<sup>60</sup>. The following précis indicates that the serial provides a sympathetic and relatively accurate portrayal of khwaja siras as both intersexual and genderqueer people.

The protagonist is a gender variant child named Babar who hails from a poor family and is rejected by his father and brother. The only people from whom he receives support are his mother and Reshma, a hijra who resides in his neighborhood. Growing up, the boy shows an interest in playing with dolls and, much to the chagrin of his father, enjoys spending time with Reshma, who is represented as a kind-hearted Good Samaritan who tries leading a respectable life and avoids engaging in socially reprehensible behavior, including singing and dancing. The child's father is determined to get Reshma evicted from the neighborhood; he blames her for her negative influence on his son and tries to build a case against her. Faced with continuous ridicule, physical abuse and rejection from family members, the child finally runs away from home and seeks refuge at Reshma's house. The father presses charges against her for kidnapping his son and Reshma is arrested. However, the case is eventually dropped when the police discover that the child went to her house by own free will. The father curses and beats the boy when he sees him with Reshma again, and the abuse continues in the protagonist's adulthood. The adult Babar, now known as Babara, dresses in women's clothes, wears makeup, has effeminate mannerisms and uses feminine gender pronouns to refer to himself. As the mother tries to protect Babar, his father yells at him to act like a man while his brother bemoans their ruined reputation in the neighborhood. The father tells Babar to either live in the house like a "human being" or to leave. The entire family blames Reshma for turning Babar into a "hijra."

It is revealed that Babar's brother is unable to get married because the potential bride's family is unwilling to send their daughter to a home where a hijra lives. At the same time, Babar's mother harbors the hope that his effeminacy can be fixed, and she is convinced that getting him married off will fix his condition. They decide that their niece will make a suitable bride. Babar agrees to the proposal, but appears to be mostly excited about the wedding. For the first time in his life, his father and brother shower him with love for agreeing to live a normative life. The girl, Kausar, also agrees to the proposal but she has not met Babar in years and is oblivious to his gender difference. Babar's parents encourage him to be masculine, to cut his hair short and to avoid using feminine pronouns in front of Kausar. In the meantime, Babar's mother demands Reshma to sever ties with Babar. Reshma reluctantly obliges and warns Babar to never return to her house. On the day of his wedding, she secretly watches him getting married from the sidelines.

Kausar does not get to meet Babar until after the nikāḥ. On the night after the wedding, Kausar immediately notices Babar's effeminacy and breaks down crying. However, she decides to work on her relationship with him in order to avoid bringing shame upon herself and her family. Soon after, Kausar gets pregnant, but by this time, Babar has left home to nurse an ailing Reshma who is fighting cancer. Kausar urges him to change his ways but she is unable to stop him. Later that night, she too runs away from

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<sup>60</sup> The play was written by Seema Ghazal and directed by Kamran Qureshi.

her in-law's house to go live with her aunt in Hyderabad. There, she eventually gives birth to a girl, but Babar does not try to build a relationship with his daughter. Babar and Kausar's marriage ends in divorce, and Kausar marries her cousin. Reshma suffers her entire life due to the sacrifices she makes for Babar; she is abused and threatened by Babar's family and evicted from the neighborhood. Her miserable life ends with her dying a painful death.

With the divorce settled and Babar having left home, his brother is free to marry the girl of his choice. Babar is excluded from his brother's wedding because his new sister-in-law does not approve of him. Eventually the brother and sister-in-law begin living separately after a dispute involving Babar. By this point in the narrative, Babar's parents feel hopeless at the loss of both their sons and his mother goes insane. Babar returns home to nurse his mother back to health, but she passes away. Babar blames himself for his her death and regrets not trying harder to build his relationship with his ex-wife. The serial concludes with Babar continuing to live a life of poverty as a dancer.

The serial focuses as much on Babar as it does on Kausar in order to highlight the betrayal and sacrifice that Pakistani women endure when they are married to non-conforming "men." It also underscores the immense pressure that families exerted on queer children to marry, as well as the lengths to which they went to ensure that their children conformed to social norms. While both women and gender ambiguous people are presented as being trapped within an oppressive heteronormative system, their families are depicted as both pawns in and enforcers of a patriarchal system.

The term *khwaja sira* does not appear in the drama serial. This is not surprising given that *Moorat* was produced in 2005, at a time when the word *khwaja sira* was less popular. Instead, "hijra" is the chosen word used in the narrative by both *khwaja siras* and ordinary people. The ambiguity of the hijra identity and corporeality is maintained through the repetition of a singular dialogue: "It's not like he is a hijra!" This statement is made by Babar's mother to emphasize the fundamental difference between him and the *khwaja siras* with whom he/she associates. What is clear is that Babar is biologically male, which makes him/her capable of marriage and reproduction. When Barbar is married off to Kausar, and she becomes pregnant, the neighbors mockingly express their disbelief at Babar's ability to impregnate her. When a neighborhood



woman says, “I can’t believe your son is having a child,” Babar’s mother responds indignantly, “He is not a hijra! Only his way of walking and moving around is a little bad.” *Moorat* perpetuates the myth that those who possess a feminine soul are not really hijras, and that those who are real hijras like Reshma suffer from some form of natural physical “disability.”

The serial does not address the source of Babar’s gender difference. Although his condition is shown to be enduring and immune to human intervention, it is also suggested that children like Babar joined hijra communities due to rejection at home. Hence, the narrative entertains the possibility that gender variant males may be spared through familial love and acceptance. Overall, though, the drama is sympathetic to the plight of those who suffer both gender and genital ambiguities.

Sympathetic images of khwaja siras also circulated through television news. A 2011 ARY News Report focusing on the homicide of two khwaja sira in Hyderabad is a case in point.

Khwaja siras, who participate in our happy occasions, are humans like us. However, to give these innocent providers of happiness grief is the biggest injustice of our society. Two khwaja siras were murdered in Hyderabad. Khwaja siras took to the streets in order to demand justice and the arrest of the murderers of their companions... We will have to think about khwaja siras. They too are human beings like us but what kind of treatment are we meting out on them?

The news anchor’s commentary is meant to evoke compassion for gender ambiguous people.

The same year, Samaa TV news reported on the poverty and unemployment of khwaja siras in the city of Naushahro Feroze, Sindh. The report voiced the concerns of the interviewees who urged to the government to create jobs for khwaja siras in order to empower them to lead “respectable” lives. Despite the diversity in belief and public perception towards them, khwaja siras were highly stigmatized people. The remaining sections of this chapter demonstrate that the social and religious stigma attached to gender variance generated unrest within khwaja sira communities.

## Stigma and Conflict

### The Field as Game

The concept of *khel* was relevant to the culture of khwaja siras, and particularly with respect to the various khwaja sira social systems, ethnic groups and lineages. *Khel* was a Farsi word with multiple meanings, one of which was a happy occasion or a celebration. Additionally, gender ambiguous people employed the word *khel* in everyday speech to refer to the rules, rituals and traditions of the various khwaja sira networks. Incidentally, *khel* is also an Urdu word meaning “game,” which suggests that the beliefs and practices of the various khwaja sira assemblages could be likened to a form of play. “Our parties and rituals are like games where we celebrate and have fun,” said Nadia. Khwaja siras often used phrases, such as “the game of Sindhis” (*Sindhioon ka khel*) or “the game of zennanas” (*zennanoon ka khel*), where *khel* or game referred to specific khwaja sira ethnic and social systems and their cultural content.

However, the understanding of *khel* as a form of play also suggests that khwaja siras considered their world to be somewhat removed from reality. *Hasi* referred to the kin ties within the khwaja sira social system as fictional relationships (*filmī rishte*) that could never replace blood ties. I often heard khwaja siras referring to their chosen names as screen names (*filmī nām*), especially since many of them were literally derived from movies and popular culture (e.g., Bollywood inspired names, such as Kiran and Sapna), and the domain of khwaja siras as a cinematic world (*filmī dunyā*). *Filmī* evoked the impermanence, interchangeability and the invented quality of the personas and social relationships within the khwaja sira universe. It was not unusual for gender ambiguous people to change their names or their khwaja sira families.

Gender ambiguous people made a distinction between mainstream society, which consisted of their biological kin, and the field where khwaja siras had created their own set of rules and relationships. As a stigmatized group, they were cognizant not only of their own shortcomings but also of the fashioned quality and the divergence of their cultural system from the norms of the wider society. They displayed a sense of ambivalence towards their adopted culture, which many denigrated as an invented reality. This is not to say that the culture of khwaja siras was an artificial reality, but that gender ambiguous people themselves were at times unwilling to give it credence. They saw as authentic the norms of mainstream society into which they had been enculturated. However, the fact that this culture was as much a construction as the khwaja sira universe into which they had been acculturated was inconceivable to them.

Like games, the khwaja sira world was a temporary existence for many gender ambiguous people, particularly for those who were married with children. The obligation to preserve one's paternal bloodline and the need for old age support resulted in a lack of commitment to the khwaja sira way of life and an eventual return to biological kin upon retirement. While on the one hand, gender ambiguous people claimed that they were unable to live without khwaja siras, on the other hand, they were unable to ignore the significance of blood ties even though these relationships were as tenuous as their khwaja sira ones. The cultural importance of biological ties and heterosexual marriage trumped the relationships forged within the khwaja sira universe. Even though the field was an important aspect of their lives, many khwaja siras perceived it to be a porous and transitory sphere. This enhanced the game-like quality of the khwaja sira social system, which was, nonetheless, just as captivating as games are meant to be.

## Hierarchy and Dissention

Despite their commonalities, the relationships between zennana, zānkhā, hijra, transgender and gay individuals were fraught with conflict. Within their power structure was an institutionalized rivalry between zennanas and hijras where the former have traditionally been considered inferior by the latter due to their duality. Hijras criticized zennanas for wanting to make the best of both worlds by living a double life between their biological and khwaja sira families. They contended that zennanas were untrustworthy and disloyal, and that they exploited the khwaja sira cultural system for personal benefit only to get married to women and abandon their queer relationships in old age.

Once a person gets operated, he cannot leave the field. Then he becomes a full-time hijra...[and other] hijras trust her completely [because]...a nirbān closes all the doors for herself and has only one direction to go in.

Payal implies that, unlike zennanas, hijras did not have offspring to rely on for retirement support, and they were committed to the khwaja sira way of life, which hinged on severing ties with biological kin.

Alternatively, zennanas claimed that hijras were untrustworthy and self-centered because they denounced their religion and blood ties by committing the grave sin of emasculation. On a cold winter day, Soni, a zennana, and I sat in the warmth of her kitchen next to the open flame of the stove. Between puffs of her cigarette, Soni said, “Today let me tell you the gist of everything about hijras.” My eyes lit up as I waited intently for her to elaborate.

Those who sacrifice their bodies, can never be loyal to anyone. Those who forego *that* part of their body, break off many relationships at the same time. A person who breaks his ties with his parents and siblings, and gives up his religion, can such a person be loyal to others? Never!

Soni linked emasculation to religion, familial ties, and moral character, suggesting that those who opted to become nirbān were unreliable and selfish because they placed personal desires

above family and faith. Even though zennanas and hijras forged familial relationships, the underlying tensions between them produced frictions in their everyday interactions.

Those in the upper echelons of the khwaja sira social hierarchy categorically discriminated against those who ranked below them. Roughly, hijras were situated above other gender ambiguous people, followed by unmarried zennanas who dressed mostly in women's clothes, and finally married zennanas who situationally adopted either a feminine or masculine appearance. Other queer groups (e.g., zānkhā and gay men) ranked much lower along the hierarchy of non-normative beings. During disputes, it was not uncommon for hijras to disparage zennanas by calling them men because they possessed male genitals, situationally adopted a masculine persona, and many were even married with children. "A zennana's heart is like a khwaja sira's, and his behavior is like a khwaja sira's, but he is only 50% like khwaja sira in terms of talking, dressing, walking," said Payal. "Akvās are not complete khwaja siras," added Naima, an emasculated khwaja sira. This viewpoint was a reproduction of the mainstream perception that those who possessed male genitals and were capable of reproduction were men who posed as khwaja siras merely to earn a living. As a result, some zennanas choose to elevate their status through emasculation.

Likewise, unmarried zennanas who were committed to a khwaja sira lifestyle excluded married zennanas from the khwaja sira identity category. "A complete khwaja sira is someone who only lives life as a khwaja sira," said Noor, an akvā khwaja sira who dressed in women's clothes fulltime. In turn, both hijras and zennanas denigrated zānkhās as individuals who were exclusively interested in sex with men and enjoyed being penetrated by them, an act that lowers a person's status as a man. In contrast, a khwaja sira's desire to be penetrated by a man did not lower her status among gender ambiguous people because khwaja siras did not consider

themselves to be men. Further, hijras and zennanas criticized gender ambiguous people who underwent sex-reassignment or belonged to middle-class families.

Then you have those who think they are women. They don't want to be khwaja siras. These types do *overacting*, "*Hello! Hi! How are you?*" They don't consider themselves to be khwaja siras. Khwaja siras have their own way of talking. They clap! But these madams don't like the clap at all. They wear modern clothes and whatnot.

Above, Naima censures transgender-identifying individuals who were ashamed to call themselves khwaja siras. Moreover, through her mimicry of their pretentious affectations and use of the English language, she underscores the difference in class and level of modernity between them and ordinary khwaja siras. Gender ambiguous people discriminated against one another in line with dominant beliefs pertaining to khwaja sira identity, sexuality and corporeality. The double stigma that many khwaja siras experienced, both from mainstream society and from within their networks, often led them to question the validity of their own claims. Consequently, in compliance with the normative view, one that hijras used to ridicule them, zennanas oftentimes conceded that they were men since they were genitally male.

Most khwaja siras, especially those who did not have direct social ties with gay men, did not look kindly upon them. They viewed them as *zānkhās*, and addressed them with pejorative terms like *gāndū* and *dharonā* (a man who enjoys being anally penetrated). Khwaja siras believed that gay men were promiscuous because they engaged in sexual activity with multiple partners for pleasure as opposed to financial need.

### Mentor-Disciple Conflict

Although the field provided safety and emotional support to gender ambiguous people, it was also an oppressive space for many. The guru-celā relationship was one of the sources of strife within the khwaja sira universe. Conflicts between mentors and disciples generally revolved

around issues of money, insufficient care, jealousy, and disrespect. Every so often, local law enforcement intervened in family feuds if they got out of hand. The connection between gurus and celās was likened to the father-son or parent-child relationship. In effect, mentors treated students with love and kindness but they also disciplined and punished them as they saw fit. “I treat them like children,” said Hajra. “When a child misbehaves...the parent punishes the child.” However, such parental chastisement often became oppressive. Gurus and celās who were not on good terms with one another compared their relationship as one between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (*sās* and *bahu*), highlighting the particular strain of contentions that are typical for these affines within the South Asian context.

While some mentors were nurturing, others routinely reprimanded disciples and made them slog over domestic chores. For instance, Saima regularly ordered Bubbly around and pointed out her mistakes. Bubbly detested being mistreated but refrained from retaliating. Even though she could have left Saima, she chose to stay with her in order to avoid having to start afresh in another khwaja sira family, which would entail relocating, forging new relationships, and getting acquainted with a new earning area. However, other khwaja siras were more easily inclined to severing ties with abusive mentors.

The following altercation between Myla and her celā, Anila, illustrates how khwaja siras reproduced dominant cultural beliefs to stigmatize one another.

**Anila:** Guru, give me that outfit before you leave.

**Myla:** (raises her voice) Do I even have clothes to wear right now?

**Anila:** I'll give you another outfit.

**Myla:** These celās have no shame! I wish God gives them students just like them.

**Anila:** You insult me all the time. You don't understand my *feelings*, Guru.

**Myla:** (Myla starts clapping at Anila) It's good that you became my celā and learned how to bless. Otherwise, you used to get your ass fucked.

**Anila:** But that's how we all start.

**Myla:** Right, by running brothels...I never opened a brothel.

**Anila:** (in exaggerated seriousness) You'd never open one, Guru.

**Myla:** I just do it to the extent that I can fill my stomach...But my ass isn't open. I have so many celās that I would feel ashamed if still I had to do sex work.

Eventually, the argument subsided, and the two began cutting unstitched cloth. Later, when Myla left, Anila told me her side of the story.

She insults me so much, Faris Bhāī. Am I any less than other khwaja siras? Don't I look beautiful? What am I lacking in? I was thinking about this all day yesterday. Sometimes I feel like exposing her, but then I get scared. Before I became her celā, she and I used to get ass fucked together. Today she exposed me to Deeba. She told her that I like to penetrate men. I got so annoyed. I don't know why she did it. Doesn't she see that I do all the work that women do, that I live like a woman. What manliness does she see in me?

In conflict situations, khwaja siras often endorsed normative gender binaries, denounced illicit sexual behavior, and morally differentiated one another on the basis of mainstream beliefs.

This was evident in Myla's criticism of Anila's excessive involvement in sex work even as she justified her own limited participation in it as a dire financial necessity. Anila reinforced the belief that operating a brothel was immoral rather than challenging her guru's contempt for her choice of vocation. She did, however, express exaggerated compliance, a relatively safe form of resistance, when her guru claimed that, unlike Anila, she had never opened a brothel.

Moreover, Anila reinforced dominant gender roles. Khwaja siras expected one another to observe feminine gender and sexual roles in everyday life, and they believed it was disgraceful for them to penetrate a man. Anila did not challenge these heteronormative expectations when Myla ridiculed her for wanting to penetrate men. Instead, she compensated for her "improper" conduct by emphasizing her femininity and involvement in women's roles in other areas of life.

Gurus could place disobedient students on probation (*hukka-pāni band karnā*), which entailed a temporary ban from the mentor's familial network. No one within the guru's kin group was allowed to entertain the expelled disciple in their home or elsewhere. Those caught associating with the banned celā were required to adopt her as their own student. In addition, the



guru could levy a fine (*dand*), an amount the disciple had to pay for the restrictions to be lifted and for her to regain access to her familial network.

Ideally, khwaja siras were expected to associate with a single guru over their lifetimes. However, in reality, the guru-celā relationship was prone to dissolution. In situations where conflicts became irreconcilable, the pair parted ways by ritually breaking ties. The celā could join another khwaja sira family, and her new guru was required to pay the estranged one an appropriate transfer fee in order to complete the exchange (*pesha*)<sup>61</sup>.

The language employed in induction and transfer rituals is suggestive of how khwaja siras perceived themselves relative to ordinary people. For instance, zennana communities in Lahore appropriated a vocabulary of purity and pollution to describe a student's formal membership into a khwaja sira household, where the celā was said to be "stained" or "sullied" by her guru (*us kī gandī ho jānā*). If she decided to sever ties with her teacher, the new guru had to get the old one's "stain washed" (*dāgh dhulvāna*) in a ritualized transfer through which the celā was 'purified from' (*pāk ho jānā*) the impurities of her previous guru and thereby polluted by her new mentor. Similarly, khwaja siras in general emphasized the role of a person's first guru in "ruining" her. Here, "ruin" (*bigārah*) refers to the state of impurity following one's involvement in sexual activities and other morally questionable behavior.

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<sup>61</sup> In this ritual, the previous guru broke a matchstick in the lap of the new mentor while declaring, "From this day on, I spit (student's name) in your name." Transfer amounts varied by time, place, lineage and the student's corporeal status. For instance, *peshas* in Lahore were different from those in Karachi for both emasculated and non-emasculated khwaja siras, and they increased over time to account for the rising cost of living. However, the transfer amount of a beautiful khwaja sira who danced well and had a higher earning potential was generally more than the going rate. In 2011, *pesha* was set to Rs. 25,000 (approx. \$286) for non-emasculated khwaja siras and Rs. 50,000 (approx. \$571) for emasculated khwaja siras among certain groups in Karachi. Student transfer fees were fixed but negotiable, and the families involved collectively decided the final amount of the exchange.

To an outsider like myself, these linguistic expressions seemed unusual and superfluous, and yet they ideologically configured the relationships between students and mentors. The vocabulary used suggests that mentors were not merely a source of corruption but of a particular strand of impurity linked to her household. Moreover, they underscored the overall state of impurity of those associated with the field relative to respectable society. By this logic, everyone within the khwaja sira cultural system was stained and ruined since each individual was associated with a guru and was involved in socially unacceptable practices. Hence, as stigmatized people, khwaja siras upheld the dominant social belief that they were dirty people and drew upon a vocabulary that rendered them impure. Although the specific phrasing varied by region and identity, a general language of purity and contamination was prevalent across khwaja sira communities. To my knowledge, such language was not appropriated to describe other mentor-student type relationships beyond khwaja sira communities.

### Communal Conflict

Community meetings (*caṭāī*) were regularly held by gender ambiguous people to discuss important matters involving entire clans, and especially to deliberate over and resolve conflicts between its members. Khwaja sira conflicts revolved around a number of issues, such as the violation of codes of conduct (e.g., the illegal adoption of someone else's student, disrespecting elders, improper reciprocal exchanges, forbidden sexual practices), theft, ethnic disputes, wrangles over corporeal differences, etc. The family elders of those involved in conflicts were expected to intervene in and mitigate disputes through community meetings. These meetings become heated quickly and fierce fights tended to occur before any resolution was reached.

The following incident highlights community stigma and the production of status marking boundaries among gender ambiguous people. Here, boundary-making refers to everyday activities through which differences in lifestyle, habits, desires, and practices are articulated and negotiated (Ray and Qayum 2009, 8). The example below draws attention to the significance of secrecy in interactions between khwaja siras and the general public. This dispute, the most impassioned one I witnessed during fieldwork, took place between Noreen and her guru, Sarhadi. The altercation took place during a community meeting that had been organized to resolve an ongoing quarrel between the disciple and her mentor. Twelve other family members attended the session. Payal, who was the mother of the individuals involved in the dispute, served as the moderator for the meeting.

First, Noreen and Sarhadi were asked to narrate their individual accounts of the dispute, from which I gathered the backstory. Noreen had purchased a gold nose ring from her hard earned money. When Sarhadi asked Noreen to give her the nose ring, her student suggested that she buy it from her for Rs. 3,000, the amount that she had paid for the item. Sarhadi proposed a selling price of Rs. 2000 and Noreen agreed. However, at the time of the meeting, Noreen had received a mere Rs. 300 from her guru. In addition, Sarhadi had borrowed a pair of Noreen's gold earrings but never returned them. In her defense, Sarhadi asserted that taking things from disciples was a mentor's right. A week prior to the meeting, Sarhadi and Noreen physically attacked one another in the street over the outstanding amount when a passing police patrol intervened and arrested them. In lockup, Noreen received a severe beating from her guru for revealing to the cops that Sarhadi had a wife and child. The following day, Payal bailed both of them out.

Sarhadi maintained an aggressive stance throughout the meeting, which eventually led to high drama. When Noreen started narrating her side of the story, Sarhadi tried to attack her but other khwaja siras interceded to prevent the assault. Unable to say her piece, Noreen grew increasingly frustrated. Then, suddenly she tore the front of her top. As she stood with her bra exposed, Noreen threatened to tell the police that Sarhadi had torn off her clothes. In a fit of rage, Sarhadi sprung to her feet and tore the rest of Noreen's top off her chest. Payal got up and violently pushed Sarhadi away from Noreen. Tensions ran high as other participants chimed in, but ultimately, Sarhadi triumphed over Noreen who found herself defenseless against the argument that a mentor had the right to seize her student's possessions. Even though the meeting participants sympathized with Noreen, they were unable to bring her justice. Instead, she was admonished for disclosing Sarhadi's marital status to the police officers<sup>62</sup>. Payal reprimanded Noreen for disclosing the secrets of khwaja siras to non-khwaja siras, and threatened to personally put Noreen behind bars for telling outsiders that khwaja siras get married and are capable of reproduction.

This incident sheds light on a variety of issues: the contentions between mentors and disciples, the high drama characteristic of community meetings, the boundary-making practices of this stigmatized group, and the role of secrets in everyday life. Khwaja siras frequently used the beliefs of the dominant society as a dividing practice against one another. For instance, in revealing to the police officers that Sarhadi was married with children, Noreen echoed the normative belief that khwaja siras were incapable of reproduction, and that those like Sarhadi who were able to produce offspring with women were inauthentic khwaja siras. Unmarried khwaja siras often used this dominant misconception as a boundary-making practice against

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<sup>62</sup> Reporting community members as 'fake' hijras to the police during personal and communal disputes is also common practice in India (Hall 2005, 126).

married khwaja siras. The conflicts between gender ambiguous people were not only products of stigma but also a matter of power. Foucauldian analysis indicates that “dividing practices” depend upon institutionalized knowledge to categorize, ostracize, and disempower people (Knaft 1994: 405). As a stigmatized group, khwaja siras adhered to and perpetuated the norms of the wider society as a means of accessing power, often at the cost of disempowering their own kind.

### Beauty and Self-Esteem

The importance of physical attractiveness within the khwaja sira social world was partly responsible for rupturing relationships among gender ambiguous people, and was among the factors that contributed to issues of self-esteem among this stigmatized group. “It’s all about looks in our field,” said Pinky. “A celā who is *m’ashūq*, who has good looks, is beneficial to a guru. The more beautiful a murat, the more she will earn.” *M’ashūq* referred to a younger and beautiful khwaja sira who was aware of her youthful good looks. These beauties were believed to have a superiority complex, that is, a grand sense of self and a false self-confidence that was predicated on physical appearance. “Murats think they are *m’ashūq*,” said Nadia. “Even when they fall, they get right up and say, ‘So what? I’m *m’ashūq*!’ and then continue walking with an attitude even if the rest of the world laughs at them.”

A superiority complex is often closely linked to a low self-esteem and narcissism.

Khwaja sira activists and NGO employees who worked with gender ambiguous people believed that they suffered from low self-worth due to the social stigma they experienced from an early age, and that the ridicule, rejection and violence they suffered in everyday life resulted in an inferiority complex. Psychologists have suggested that a superiority complex is often a façade to

conceal personal insecurities and imperfections. For instance, narcissists simultaneously experience both a high and a low self-esteem (Brown and Bosson 2001, 210). Such individuals are in constant need of admiration and respect from others (Baumeister and Vohs 2001, 208). They are also prone to attaining a false sense of security by ridiculing and criticizing others. Fault-finding in others, getting defensive when criticized, and feelings of jealousy are signs of a low self-image (Hauck 1992, 13-5).



**Figure 8.** Saima performing a solo dance at Muskaan's birthday party.

When khwaja siras entered the field and began to feminize, they tended to receive praise and approval for the very first time in their lives. They were praised for their appearance both by khwaja siras and male admirers, and many gained recognition as dancers and sex workers. Within khwaja sira communities, these compliments sowed the seeds for a superior sense of self among attention-starved and narcissistic gender variant youth, who clung to their accolades, constantly sought the admiration of others, and turned against their competitors in a bid to weed them out. "Murats gets jealous very easily," said Jhalak. "When they see someone moving up, they think, 'Why not me?'" Similarly, Nadeem, an NGO employee, suggested that "[w]hen a person does not get anything her entire life, and when she finally gets some fame, she wants that she alone should get it because she just started getting it." Many gender ambiguous youth were

convinced that their beauty made them the targets of the jealousy and ill will of their competitors. Such beliefs instigated jealousy and fierce rivalry between them and their contenders. Structural violence left psychological scars that surfaced in their aggression towards one another.

“When a m’ashūq khwaja sira is jealous of a murat, she will go to that khwaja sira’s party and try to ruin it,” said Nadia. “In most parties, something or the other always happens towards the end of the night.” When two rowdy drunk men gatecrashed her party, Tina swiftly had them removed from the premises. She was convinced that her nemesis, Kajal, had deliberately invited the men to ruin her day. Gender ambiguous people routinely acknowledged the lack of unity within their communities, a phenomenon they attributed to the personal jealousies among m’ashūq khwaja siras. Although a psychoanalysis of khwaja siras is beyond the scope of this study, the concept of m’ashūq and its connection with inferiority/superiority complex helps to explain in culturally grounded terms the conflicts that occurred among gender ambiguous people.

### Sex and Morality

Among the secrets that khwaja siras kept from the general public were their sexual relationships with men. In light of the taboos associated with sex, it was prudent of them to be discreet about their love and sex lives. Although sex was not a taboo topic within their culture, khwaja siras often drew moral boundaries among themselves on the basis of sexual behavior.

Generally, a partnered khwaja sira (*giryē valī murat*) was distinguished from a khwaja sira prostitute (*pun valī murat*). Within the khwaja sira universe, being in a monogamous relationship with one lover was considered more respectable than being sexually active outside a committed relationship. This was evident in altercations between khwaja siras wherein

participants morally elevated themselves by criticizing opponents whose primary source of livelihood was sex work or if they had multiple sexual partners. They appraised their own status through monogamy and deemed inferior those khwaja siras who were sexually active outside committed relationships. Fidelity was perceived to be less sinful and more respectable compared to sex work and extra-relationship sexual liaisons because it mimicked marital bonds.

As Goffman has suggested, internal discrimination is common practice among stigmatized groups since they tend to hold the same beliefs as the wider society that aims to oppress the stigmatized (1963, 111). Gender ambiguous people perceived the khwaja sira lifestyle to be generally disresponsible. However, within this regime of morality, sex work and sex with multiple partners was denigrated to the lower end of the respectability spectrum.

In contrast, monogamy was held in high esteem. When questioned about their sex life during interviews, khwaja siras were generally hesitant to discuss their involvement in sex work but were far more comfortable describing relationships with their partners. “Prostitution, I do very little,” said Chammo, and added after a moment’s pause, “Actually, I barely do it. I have a friend, so whatever I do is with him.” Chammo’s dubious response left me feeling as though she had not been entirely truthful about her involvement in sex work. When I switched off my voice recorder upon the completion of the interview, Chammo finally decided to reveal intimate details about her sex life. I learned that she had eight steady “giryās” who financially supported her.

The reason why Chammo was reluctant to divulge facts about her sexual relationships during the interview was because she did not want any audio evidence that could link her true identity to such practices. However, Chammo was not opposed to me taking notes, which I did, once the recorder was switched off. Hence, she was less concerned with revealing private information and more with maintaining anonymity. To this end, I have secured her and the



identity of other informants by using pseudonyms and withholding other identifying information that could impact her moral standing within the communities of which she is a part.

With respect to love and sex, there was a stark difference between Chammo's recorded and non-recorded interview narratives. While being recorded, she was uncomfortable discussing her involvement in sex work, but was unopposed to describing an imagined relationship with a partner. However, after the interview, I learned that Chammo had lied about being in a relationship with a man. Interestingly, she referred to her eight steady clients as "giryās," a term that was generally used to describe a single lover, boyfriend or husband. Instead of employing the Farsi word for client (pun), Chammo used the term "giryā," which encapsulated respectability and sexual propriety. Evidently, having eight steady clients was less immoral than having sex with every other man that was willing to pay for it.

Informants emphasized the need for collective secrecy about sex work as a form of communal responsibility among khwaja siras. Those who rarely engaged in sex work discriminated against brothel and street operators who were generally less cautious about hiding their engagement in prostitution. Informants attributed the gradual decline in the status of khwaja siras to their open association with "vice."

Back in the day people used to hire khwaja siras to work in their homes. But now this no longer happens because khwaja siras have become sex workers. And those who are sex workers don't have to make it known to the whole world that they are sex workers.

Above, Shazia suggests that khwaja siras were personally responsible for the disappearance of employment opportunities that were traditionally associated with them. People were generally reluctant to hire khwaja siras as domestic workers due to the stigma of immorality associated with their sexualized lifestyle. Moreover, she emphasized the need to make sex work

inconspicuous to the public eye. Similarly, Chammo claimed that the negligent behavior of hijra and zennana prostitutes adversely reflected on all khwaja siras.

It is these ordinary khadras who have spread this filth, and because of them others are also getting affected... They don't do *tolī*, they don't know how to dance. They are only masters of sucking... And if you really need to do it, if you are really that helpless, then you should do it in hiding. I have a complaint against khwaja siras who have started putting up advertisements on the net that say that they are sex workers. These khwaja siras should stop doing this because it affects the reputation of other khwaja siras. In our society, if people see even one person doing it, then they think that we all do it.

Chammo believed that it was the responsibility of each gender ambiguous person to consider the impact of her actions on the entire khwaja sira population. Such cooperation was necessary to ensure the survival and to assuage the oppression of khwaja siras. Moreover, Chammo condemned street-based soliciting and the use of Internet dating/hookup websites where educated khwaja siras had created personal profiles to advertise their services.

Chammo also feared that the actions of imprudent sex workers would negatively impact khwaja siras whose livelihood depended on begging and blessing.

There are men who go online and see these ads. What if they tell their wives? Then women will find out. This makes things really bad for those who do beg and bless and meet women everyday. These women are really nice to khwaja siras, they love and embrace us, invite us into their homes, they are comfortable with us and they trust us. But all of that is going to change when these women find out that we are perfectly all right.

Chammo alludes to the fact that most gender ambiguous people had functional male sexual organs, a reality that was incongruent with the myth of intersexuality upon which the ascetic practices of begging/blessing were premised. Khwaja siras who begged and blessed for a living relied upon the patronage of the women whose houses they frequented. These women were comfortable with khwaja siras because they saw them as intersexuals who did not pose a sexual threat to them. However, Chammo believed that the recklessness of those who engaged in “vice” was detrimental to the economic activities of socially responsible khwaja siras.

Countless informants blamed the public exposure of immoral conduct among khwaja siras on the rise in rural-urban migration. In the absence of an established social network, seasonal migrants lacked not only a client base for sex work, but also membership in an earning area. Consequently, these itinerants turned to street-based sex work. Away from their natal villages, these individuals were quite comfortable prostituting openly in a city where no one knew them. This issue was regularly raised on television talk shows where gender ambiguous people were censured for tarnishing society's moral order. Khwaja siras blamed genderqueer migrants for marring their public image through acts of indecency. In truth, migrants alone were not liable for the deteriorating social status of khwaja siras since many gender variant Karachiites also worked the streets.

Khwaja siras viewed sex work to be immoral even as they engaged in it<sup>63</sup>. Many khwaja siras whose primary source of income was begging, blessing or dancing engaged in prostitution strictly to supplement their incomes. They minimized their involvement in sex work by limiting it to times of financial need. Noor, for instance, used to run a brothel in her home where she and her guru-bhāi prostituted themselves. However, after several years of being in the sex industry, she decided to make a career change by switching to begging as a primary economic activity in order to distance herself from vice. Unfortunately, she was unable to make ends meet through begging, and returned to sex work from time-to-time to cover her monthly expenses. The khwaja sira worldview consisted of shades of sin, where the occasional rendezvous with a client was

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<sup>63</sup> Although the average khwaja sira viewed sex work as a reprehensible sin, there were a handful of educated activist khwaja siras from middle-class backgrounds who held more progressive values. For instance, even though Mehreen considered sex work to be sinful and claimed to have reduced her personal involvement in it, she also believed in the individual right to choose how to use one's body. "Yes, sex work is a sin, but I also think there should be freedom to do sex work for those who want to do it. No one should have the right to raise a finger against those who do it." However, Mehreen represented a minority voice along the khwaja sira social spectrum. Gender ambiguous folk who held similar beliefs were few and far between.

considered less shameful than full-time prostitution. In times of conflict, khwaja siras used their opponent's level of involvement in sex work to morally elevate themselves.

### To Excise or Preserve?

The origin story cited at the beginning of this chapter highlighted that the practice of physical emasculation was steeped in stigma even though it was a crucial marker of hijra identity. The decision whether or not to become emasculated was guided by a number of stigmatizing factors that generated in khwaja siras a sense of ambivalence about becoming nirbān. One of the primary motivations behind genital amputation was to achieve upward mobility within the khwaja sira social structure. A khwaja sira's identity changed from zennana to hijra after her excision, and with it her status among khwaja siras also rose. "Nirbāns respect other nirbāns because they know that they have nowhere else to go," said Shehzadi. Unlike zennanas who came and went, hijras were permanent members of the khwaja sira universe. Their fixity, owing to their post-surgical liminality, made them loyal and dependable since they had a stake in carving space for themselves within their communities. In contrast, zennanas were considered unreliable.

Another incentive of becoming nirbān was that it gave gender ambiguous people the confidence to pose as an authentic khwaja siras, that is, as individuals with congenital ambiguities. An emasculated khwaja sira was better suited to maintaining the façade of intersexuality in interactions with the wider society.

If you put a nirbān in front of society, they will accept her. Say we go to someone's house to beg and they say things like, "You're not even a khwaja sira," then we have to show it to them as proof. But this is a bad thing, so we mostly lift our shirts and only threaten to show them our genitals. But if you put an akvā in her place, people will say that she is a poser, a man, someone who is pretending to be a khwaja sira, and that there is nothing physically wrong with him. People turn against akvās. Akvās lose their confidence in front of the general public because they have penises.

Above, Payal explains that hijras could resort to the practice of exposing their mutilated genitals to ordinary people and misrepresenting them as God-given in order to prove their legitimacy as deserving alms receivers. In contrast, *akvā khwaja siras* risked persecution from the general public in the event that their genital status were revealed. Hence, physical emasculation promoted the well being of *khwaja siras* in everyday life and authenticated them as worthy recipients of charity.

Several gender ambiguous people claimed to have emasculated themselves out of jealousy (*khundak*) and competition with hijras. Quite often, hijras exposed rival *zennanas* to the general public as “men” with penises. Competition and conflict within *khwaja sira* networks prompted some *zennanas* to become *nirbān* in order to protect themselves from internal adversity. For instance, Naima’s battles with her *khwaja sira* family members led her down the path to emasculation.

My guru kicked me from our area, and she and my guru-bhāī started telling the neighbors that she threw me out because I was a boy and not a hijra. She wanted to make sure that no one gave me money if I tried to beg in her *vīrat*... So I decided to become a source of tension for them. I knew that I could only be victorious once I become a complete hijra. I saved up money and got myself operated. Then I returned to the area. When they saw me, again they ridiculed me and called me a boy. They said, “*Hai! hai!* He is a boy!” So I said, “*Hai! Hai!* Why don’t you see for yourself?” And I showed it to them... Anyway, then those *khwaja siras* started being nice to me.

The only way Naima knew how to compete with hijras was by becoming a hijra herself. She became *nirbān* out of spite because she wanted to avenge her opponents for mistreating her. She sought respect and access to her livelihood, which were possible through emasculation<sup>64</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> Yet another impetus for genital excision was the belief that it enhanced femininity. “When you become *nirbān*, you become more like a lady,” said Neelam. “Your body is no longer the same... Even your body odor changes, and you smell like a woman.” Scientifically, the elimination of testosterone produced by the testes leads to a number of physical transformations that are associated with femininity, such as the softening of body hair, the conversion of muscle

Alternatively, the chief impediment to genital excision was the popular belief among khwaja siras that becoming nirbān was a grave sin. As discussed earlier, changing the natural constitution of the body, that is, the form in which one is born, was considered to be against divine will. In addition, what dissuaded many khwaja siras from becoming nirbān was that it was permanent and irreversible. Consequently, it led to complete estrangement between khwaja siras and their biological families and also closed the option of heterosexual marriage. Many hijras regretted removing their genitals when the realities of emasculation failed to match their vision of life after the ritual. Emasculation was devalued by many khwaja siras and often discouraged within their communities.

The lack of post-surgical care was yet another deterrent to emasculation. While describing their post-op experiences, nirbān interlocutors complained about the absence of support from within the khwaja sira system. During a late night rendezvous at Payal's house, Shazia announced that she wanted to become nirbān. Annoyed, Shani and Payal told her to shut up and never to speak of it again. Next, Anjali, who had recently undergone emasculation, narrated her post-op experience as a warning to Shazia. She told Shazia to be prepared to be abandoned for at least three months by her khwaja sira contacts once she got operated. She complained the murats living with her fled when she returned home from the hospital because they were afraid of being in close proximity to and attracting her negative energy. Some khwaja siras believed that during recovery the newly emasculated possessed special powers that fed off the vitality and beauty of those with whom it came into contact<sup>65</sup>. Shazia wondered if the concept

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into fat, smoother limbs, the development of breasts, etc. The demand for attractive khwaja siras in Pakistan's sex industry drove many gender ambiguous people to opt for emasculation.

<sup>65</sup> On another occasion, Nadia recalled coming down with a very high fever after visiting her girlfriend, Sibby, who had recently undergone emasculation. Nadia wondered if she contracted the negative energy when Sibby greeted her with a suspiciously long embrace.

of negative energy was merely an excuse to evade the provision of post-op care for nirbān khwaja siras. Horror stories about lack of post-op support circulated among khwaja siras as warnings against the pitfalls of emasculation. Moreover, the concept of negative energy was yet another way in which khwaja siras stigmatized one another.

Importantly, the voluntary removal of the genitals could also be cause for a criminal investigation. Genital excision was believed to be illegal according to both secular and Islamic laws. The perceived illegality of the procedure explains why such surgeries were performed underground. The prohibitions against the non-essential removal of genitalia also elucidate why nirbān khwaja siras concealed their post-operative status from mainstream society. In conflict situations, fear of the law gave zennanas ammunition against their hijra foes. For instance, when Noor Vicky and Jugni, two influential khwaja sira gurus of Rawalpindi had an epic brawl, the former informed the authorities of the latter's emasculated status, which led to Jugni's arrest. However, the accused was later released without further investigation. The very basis of the practice of emasculation was steeped in multiple streams of stigma. Religious, legal and social disapproval from within and outside the khwaja sira system perpetuated a sense of fear and doubt among some khwaja siras while validating to most others that genital excision was an illegitimate practice that had to be obscured from the general public if not avoided altogether.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has highlighted that social stigma generated ambiguity within and conflict among khwaja siras. The stigma surrounding gender ambiguity was rooted in dominant religious and cultural notions of sex, gender and sexuality. But because these beliefs were diverse and often vague, they perpetuated a sense of indeterminacy among khwaja siras about their location in the

world. Moreover, stigma and low self-esteem destabilized khwaja sira communities, weakening relationships among their members who were prone to morally differentiating and marginalizing one another on the basis of hegemonic norms. This chapter has also revealed the dominant cultural meaning of “khwaja sira” and how gender ambiguous people were publicly perceived. The mainstream construction of khwaja sira as an intersexual person deviated from the realities of both medieval (Chapter 2) and contemporary khwaja siras (Chapter 3).



## **Chapter 5: Oppression, Marginalization, and the Games of Deception**

Late one evening I was at Billo's house when her guru, Sano, stopped by for a visit. I knew Billo well but I had met her guru just once before. While we were chatting, Sano received a call on her cell phone. I was unable to understand much of the conversation since Sano spoke, perhaps deliberately, in Sindhi, but it appeared that she was giving the caller directions to Billo's house. When she hung up, Sano told Billo to get ready to perform a blessing. "This late?" I asked. Sano said that she had just heard about a birth in her area, and wanted to visit the family right away. Billo reluctantly got up to change her outfit and put on makeup. When she was done, Sano grabbed her purse and slipped into her shoes. Taking that as my cue to leave, I asked Billo to escort me out of the colony. "I'll wait here while you go drop him off," said Sano. "Besides we have to go in the opposite direction." I said goodbye to Sano, and then Billo and I exited through the chaos of meandering lanes in her neighborhood. I asked Billo if she and her guru typically worked late in the evenings.

**Billo:** No, we don't. And we're not going to go today either.

**Faris:** Then where are you two going?

**Billo:** Try to understand. (she said with a smirk)

**Faris:** Understand what?

**Billo:** That call Sano received was from a client. My guru is going to do *it* in my house.

Suddenly everything made sense. Sano had created an elaborate ruse to get rid of me from Billo's house. There was no plan to bless a newborn, yet Sano made Billo get ready in order to make the façade believable. Sano wanted to ensure that I, a non-khwaja sira outsider, would not discover her involvement in sex work and lose respect for her. Her student, Billo, who I had become well acquainted with, helped to maintain the pretense in front of her guru, but revealed her secret and deception to me in private.

Khwaja siras regularly deceived the public, especially in matters related to their corporeality and sexuality. This chapter focuses on the games of secrecy and deception that khwaja siras played with one another and with ordinary people. These strategies of concealment fell into the realm of what James Scott refers to as “public transcripts,” a term encompassing the public interactions between subordinates and powerholders (1990, 2). I argue that these games were responses to the cultural, structural and direct violence that gender ambiguous people experienced. Galtung defines cultural and structural violence as indirect forms of oppression that are built into the dominant structure, and that legitimize unequal distribution of power, opportunities (Ho 2007, 4), and even direct violence (Galtung 1990, 291). Farmer adds that the suffering that results from such violence constrains the agency of those who hold less power (1996, 263). Given the constraints on their agency, khwaja siras countered oppression and marginalization, not by addressing the cultural and structural sources of violence, but by engaging in secrecy and deception. These, I contend, were acts of self-preservation that allowed khwaja siras to reduce discrimination, promote security, secure livelihood, and gain advantage over oppressors. This chapter also illustrates that although they were largely excluded from the dominant cultural system, khwaja siras found inroads into it and in many ways relied upon it for their livelihood. But this was the domain where they were most ostracized and persecuted.

## **Biological Family**

### Worldly People

The familial home was a place of oppression and marginalization for khwaja siras, and their sense of alienation from their natal kin is best captured by the concept of *dunyādār* (*dunyā* means world in Urdu). Gender ambiguous people underscored the distinction between khwaja siras and

non-khwaja siras through their use of this term. Duniyādār generally referred to the uninitiated, to persons belonging to mainstream society, and individuals involved in materialistic pursuits. The word indicated a person's non-khwaja sira status, which in turn suggested that they were untrustworthy outsiders from whom secrets had to be kept. By implication, khwaja siras were insiders with whom the secrets of the khwaja sira universe could be shared since they had a stake in protecting them for the sake of individual and communal security. The use of duniyādār to describe ordinary people suggests that khwaja siras did not belong to the normative social world. The term reified their marginal position in and exclusion from mainstream society.

Khwaja siras were generally believed to have no links to their biological families. The dominant misconception among the general public was that khwaja siras were intersexuals, and that when an intersexual child was born in a particular household, gender ambiguous people took the child from the parents and raised it as their own. According to this narrative, the child lost ties with his parents and was socialized solely among khwaja siras. In reality, this notion was an inaccurate reflection of khwaja sira corporeality, of how they joined the field, and the kind of social ties they retained with biological kin. Contrary to popular perception, most khwaja siras had close though unsteady affiliations with blood relatives.

### *Relationship with Relatives*

The relationships between khwaja siras and their families were characterized by routine ruptures and reconciliations, by bouts of separation and reintegration, and by repression and violence. For many, ties with family were important though largely unstable, and estrangement from relatives, however transient, was a key feature of the biographies of gender ambiguous people. The instability of these relationships hinged on the inability of khwaja siras to conform to the

gendered expectations of their assigned male sex. Parents were among the first to notice and attempt to control the gender divergence of khwaja siras. Their lack of masculinity and inability to perform their expected gender roles led to their marginalization and oppression.

### *Familial Abuse and Shame*

Khwaja siras generally lived unhappy lives in their parental homes where they were regularly ridiculed and abused by relatives. “The first time anyone calls us khadṛa in life are our family members,” said Shushmita. “Others call us names later when we step out of the house.”

Shushmita indicates that khwaja siras were not spared by their own families let alone from the larger society. Physical violence and verbal abuse were meant to realign the gendered behavior of queer children with the norms of their assigned sex. “There was no joy in the life I spent with my brothers and sisters,” said Nazo. “Among them I felt suffocated. I was around seven when my mother scolded me for walking like a girl.” Shushmita and Nazo indicate that the source of their miserable childhoods was the constant policing and humiliation from family members. Such disciplinary control also had an adverse effect on their self-esteem.

Although khwaja siras tended to have positive ties with their mothers and sisters, the men in their families mistreated them (i.e., fathers, brothers, uncles and male cousins). Shugufta’s narrative describes the heavy-handed abuse she received from her brothers.

When I started mingling with the khwaja siras in my neighborhood, my brothers said, “You go to school and along the way you start talking to *shemales*.” My brothers started beating me up. The next three years my brothers tortured me a lot. They tried to force-feed me kohl in order to ruin my voice. They said that I sounded like a woman, and they wanted me to have a masculine voice. But I managed to save myself.

Embarrassed by her queerness, Shugufta’s brothers tried to masculinize her through brute force. In addition, the uncles and cousins of gender ambiguous people were known for harassing and

spreading rumors about them. Hence, parents and siblings aimed to conceal the difference of their sons/brothers from relatives and neighbors since a gender non-conforming child was a source of shame for the family. A male child's femininity could lower a family's status and cast doubt on the respectability of the entire family unit. Munnia's brothers resented her due to her queerness. "They say, 'You are a khusrah! You have ruined our reputation! Don't come to our house!'"

### *Severing and Maintaining Ties*

When the pressure to conform became unbearable, khwaja siras ran away from home and joined the field where they found acceptance. For instance, when she was 18, Shugufta's brothers told her to leave their neighborhood. Shugufta started living by herself in a different colony where she started earning through sex work. In contrast, parents who feared losing their queer sons were careful not to pressure them to conform. Shani, who hailed from an educated lower-middle class family, said that her parent's perceptivity saved her from absconding from home.

Initially, my parents were afraid that relatives would say things, but then they realized that if they try to stop me then I would run away from home and join other khwaja siras. They preferred that I stayed with them, before their eyes...I've never lived apart from my family with khwaja siras, but sometimes my guru calls me to stay over at her place.

Shani suggests that gender variant children could live a happier and healthier childhood under the supervision of accommodating parents. Parental acceptance of a child's queerness and the absence of pressure to conform could not only create a welcoming familial environment, but also could spare such children from a life of limited options (i.e., sex work, begging and dancing).

Leaving the parental home to join the field was typically not a singular and permanent event for most khwaja siras. Rather, it entailed several episodes of separation and reintegration,

particularly in the initial years of the move from the familial home to the field. Below, Afi describes her experience of parting and reuniting with her family.

My family members used to stop me from entering this field. They would beat me. Every time they did, I would run away from home. My brother is quite strict, and he would catch me and bring me back every time. He would put police pressure on my guru and my girlfriends. He would cut my hair and make me bald. I would cry a lot. I even ate poison because of this, but I survived. Once I ran away to Bhawalpur, and I started dancing there. My mother came to get me when she found out that one of my girlfriends had been murdered by her partner. She told me to return home with her. She said that I could get my own house there. They thought at least I'll be in front of their eyes. Now I have my own house in our city, but my brother continues to pressure me.

Many parents, like Afi's, did not give up on their gender ambiguous children when they ran away from home. However, miserable with the oppressive conditions in the familial home, queer youth repeatedly distanced themselves from relatives.

### *Fluidity and Assimilation*

Many gender ambiguous people continued to maintain ties with and even financially supported their families after joining the khwaja sira social world. However, they had to take certain measures to ensure retention into their kin group. For instance, they had to switch their social identity from khwaja sira to man. This entailed transforming one's physical appearance by discarding women's clothes and dressing in men's attire, and enacting as masculine a performance as possible. Nazo, for instance, who lived in Karachi but occasionally visited her natal village in northern Punjab, cut her hair short in addition to dressing in men's clothes. Nadia adopted a masculine performance that involved walking like a man and speaking in a deep manly voice whenever she went home to Multan. However, her masculine enactment betrayed her overpowering femininity, which she was unable to fully obfuscate.

These performances were meant less for immediate kin and more for the larger familial network (i.e., extended family, villagers). The primary objective of masculine enactments was to avoid negatively impacting one's filial reputation during home visits. Moti wore men's shalvār qamīz whenever she visited her family even though her parents and siblings were aware of her involvement in the field. Gender ambiguous people "covered" their khwaja sira identities from their natal network in order to preserve familial respect (*izzat*)<sup>66</sup>. I view this ruse of gender conformity as a strand of khwaja sira deception, and a product of the social stigma they and their families experienced.

### Worldly Khwaja Siras

Many ordinary people believed that khwaja siras were intersexual ascetics who were physically incapable of reproduction. Contrary to this popular perception, khwaja siras were not situated beyond the realm of heterosexual marriage. In fact, a large majority of my informants were married to women and had children. Put differently, becoming a *dunyādār*, a "worldly person," was not beyond the reach of khwaja siras.

### *Significance of Marriage*

Khwaja siras got married due to a number of cultural, religious and practical reasons. As explained by Seema below, the primary motivation for entering a heteronormative union was reproduction.

When you're the only son, you have even more responsibilities. After all, you're a Muslim and you have to carry on your parent's lineage. Lineages can only be carried on

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<sup>66</sup> Deeply embedded within South Asian cultures, the concept of *izzat* has a "moral valence" and is associated with several axes of difference, including gender, sexuality, kinship, religion and class (Reddy, 2005, 43).

through sons. Daughters belong to the homes of others. It's different if you have two or three brothers but you have to marry when you are the only one. Besides, the closeness you feel with your own blood, you can never have with anyone else. One day God also has to take measure our good and bad deeds. We have to look at our religion. So we shouldn't always follow our own desires. Instead, we should do what God wants.

Seema explained the necessity of marriage in terms of a son's duty of reproducing and carrying his patrilineal bloodline. The patriarchal notion that bloodlines could only be transmitted through sons was taken as a biological fact rather than a cultural construction. The pressure for marriage was much higher for Seema since she was the only son in her biological family. In addition, she made an essentialist argument about affinity in social relationships, which in her opinion was strongest between individuals associated by blood. This implied that relationships forged between khwaja sira kin and lovers could never replace biological ties. Importantly, the pressure to marry came both from one's biological family and the field; khwaja siras frequently pressured unmarried members of their households to fulfill their social and religious duties through marriage. Many viewed the cultural expectation of marriage as a religious obligation, a belief that served to bolster the centrality of the institution. Marriage was generally viewed as *Sunnah*<sup>67</sup>; to marry, reproduce and increase the number of Muslims was considered a requirement for Muslims.

The secondary reasons for marriage underscore the significance of preserving familial honor and respect. One informant claimed feeling helpless when her father took off his turban, a symbol of honor and respect, and placed it by her feet. It became a matter of her father's pride and she felt compelled to concede to his wishes. When it came to marriage, khwaja siras privileged communal concerns over individual desires, which is not unusual in the wider context of the arranged marriage system. Moreover, heterosexual marriage was a means for gender

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<sup>67</sup> Sunnah is the way of life prescribed as normative for Muslims on the basis of the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad and the interpretations of the Quran.



ambiguous people to enhance personal social respectability. Another pragmatic objective of raising a family was old-age support; khwaja siras realized that their earning potential was bound to decline with the deterioration of their appearance and inability to dance and engage in sex work as they aged. The support of children was particularly important since the khwaja sira system did not ensure old-age care to khwaja sira elders. Upon retirement, married khwaja siras returned to their families and relied upon the care of their children. Nonetheless, some gender ambiguous people refrained from marriage. A few had brothers to sustain their paternal bloodlines, while others privileged individual desires and resisted the pressure of marriage.

#### *Marital Relationships and Identity Splits*

Salma was nervous about having sex with her wife on the night after her wedding. Although she was not a virgin, she had no sexual experience with women, and the thought of sleeping with her wife filled Salma with dread. That night, she pretended to be tired and went to sleep instead of engaging in the obligatory sexual act. This was very upsetting for her wife, particularly in light of the tradition in Salma's community where the morning after, the women of the household came to bathe the bride after her night with her husband. When the women arrived in the morning, Salma's wife informed them there was no need for her to shower. Salma was mortified when she heard this. She felt humiliated because her wife had implicitly disclosed her failure to fulfill her spousal role. Fearing that she would become the laughing stock of her family, Salma decided to rectify the situation by having sexual intercourse with her wife. This was a daunting task for which she had to imagine being with her giryā in order to achieve arousal. Afterwards, she got dressed and went outside to tell her sisters-in-law to bathe the bride. By speaking audibly, Salma ensured that everyone in the house heard that she had successfully completed her

duty. Salma's narrative illustrates that khwaja siras routinely had to establish respect within familial contexts by affirming their position as men.

After marriage, khwaja siras maintained a dual life between the field and their families. They achieved this duality through the fluidity and situatedness of their multiple selves, which allowed them to switch roles, that is, from man/son/husband/father, on the one hand, to khwaja sira/zennana/hijra on the other. Notably, migration enabled khwaja siras to participate in multiple social worlds. The situatedness of their identities was evident in their migration practices, particularly when they traversed geographical spaces, from rural to urban and between khwaja sira and worldly contexts. For instance, gender ambiguous people from across Pakistan migrated to Karachi for work, where the sheer distance from their families enabled them to live openly as khwaja siras.

The wives of gender ambiguous individuals were generally unaware of their husband's queerness. Seema hid her khwaja sira identity from her wife and children who lived in rural Punjab.

I do not make it obvious to them that this is what I am. They don't know at all. I live in Karachi and send them a remittance every month. Now my older son, *māshaāllah*<sup>68</sup>, is working at a big company. [He]...has made contacts with big people. If I live with them, then obviously people are going to notice. So I have come here, far away from them.

Seema distanced herself from her wife and children in order to protect them from shame. On the rare occasion that she visited them, she obscured her queerness by transforming her appearance. Although gender ambiguous people were unable to fully conceal their femininity, most were at least able to hide the fact that they lived and earned a living as khwaja siras, which was

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<sup>68</sup> An Arabic term meaning "willed by God," used to express appreciation for a person or an occurrence.

considered to be far more shameful. In contrast, a few individuals opted for a full disclosure of their khwaja sira selves.

My wife knows everything. I told her, “I’ve kept you with respect. I’ve never asked you to work. So many men bring their wives to Karachi and make them work in big houses. At least, I’ve kept you at home under our roof and maintained your respect, haven’t I?” I told her, “This is how I am, and this is how I will always be.” Her girlfriends wish they had a husband like me because I don’t beat my wife and I take good care of her. I send Rs. 10,000 to her every month. I even make clothes for her. A lot of khwaja siras stop caring about their wives when they become too involved in the field.

Nadia told her wife about her khwaja sira identity instead of carrying the burden of deceit.

Women who learned about the non-heteronormativity of their husbands were likely to conceal their spouse’s queerness in order to protect both personal and familial respect, especially since divorce was rarely an option for women from poor households who were financially dependent on their husbands. The same applied to the children of those khwaja siras who knew or at least had a good idea that their fathers lived as khwaja siras in the city<sup>69</sup>.

The families of gender ambiguous people had to engage in secrecy because the stigma attached to being a khwaja sira extended to them by association. Goffman writes that “[i]n general, the tendency for a stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections provides a reason why such relationships tend either to be avoided or to be terminated, where existing.” (1963, 30). Although some khwaja siras terminated their ties with their relatives, in most cases, both they and their families variously engaged in avoidance, secrecy and image management in order to sustain their relationships with one another while preserving the pretense of respectability. In contrast, in the cities where they lived openly as khwaja siras, gender ambiguous people concealed their marital status from mainstream society in

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<sup>69</sup> After her wife’s untimely death, Naima, who had adopted a permanent khwaja sira appearance, had her teenaged son come live with her in Karachi.

order to perpetuate the stereotype of intersexuality, childlessness and asceticism associated with being a khwaja sira.

## **Partners**

### Gendered Violence

Besides family members, khwaja siras experienced oppression and abuse from their partners.

The gendered interactions between them and their giryās indicate that male power and privilege was reproduced in hijra and zennana circles. Men who financially supported their khwaja sira lovers were particularly strict, and often a breach of the parameters set by them resulted in verbal and physical abuse. While some giryās treated their partners with love and affection, others were downright demeaning; they interrupted their speech, did not respond to questions, and laughed at their comments. I was appalled to observe Khurram mistreat Tamanna one afternoon at her guru's house. He scolded and pushed her whenever she stood in front of the window in plain sight of her neighbors. After lunch, he snapped his fingers and rudely motioned her to take his plate to the kitchen. When she refused, he repeated his command in a strict tone of voice. However, Tamanna complied only when her grand-guru gently asked to remove the plate. Giryās tended to treat their partners the same way they believed women should be treated. Male dominance was thus reinforced in giryā-murat relationships, and to some extent, khwaja siras expected and encouraged it.

Some jealous men took extreme measures to restrict their khwaja sira lovers from interacting with other men. For instance, when Hasi fell in love with a boy at the age of twenty-two, she did not expect her life to change completely at the end of her seven-month relationship with him.

He started to *torture* me. He would fight with me all the time. He'd say, "Don't dance! Don't stand there! Don't meet so-and-so." These were the things that made me run away from him. I started living in another neighborhood. He looked around for me and found out where I was living. Then one day he came to my house and threw acid on me. I spent quite a lot of time in the hospital. My face and hand got badly burnt. After that, I saved up and had two operations.

Hasi's giryā scarred her for life as punishment for her insubordination. Similarly, Nammo's partner shot her in a fit of rage while under narcotic influence. Nammo succumbed to her wounds after spending several days in the hospital. Khwaja siras responded in a number of different ways to domestic abuse. Some, like Hasi and Nammo, failed to take timely action, but many stood up against violence and promptly broke ties with abusive partners.

#### Financial Support and Control

The relationships between khwaja siras and their lovers were based primarily on love, but often also on monetary benefit. Giryās had to support their partners for practical reasons, especially if sex work and dancing were their primary sources of income. When a gender ambiguous person commenced her relationship with a man, her lover was likely to restrict her from dancing before or having sex with other men. These khwaja siras had little means of sustenance other than their partners giving them monthly stipends comparable to their income potential through sex work and begging. In such situations, the khwaja sira and her giryā determined a suitable monthly amount that enabled her to maintain financial stability while allowing the couple to be monogamous.

Khwaja siras who were financially supported by their partners had fewer freedoms since giryās tended to impose restrictions on their mobility, social interactions, and livelihood practices. Gender ambiguous people developed different approaches to dealing with controlling

men. Hasi, who had previously been in an abusive relationship, claimed that she was no longer willing to settle for and be controlled by a man unless he could satisfy her monetary needs.

There are so many men who say they want to do *friendship* with me. They say that they will give me Rs. 20,000 a month but I will not be allowed to meet other men, and I tell them that that won't be possible. Why would I settle for Rs. 20,000 for the whole month when I make much more on my own?

The price of a monogamous relationship with Hasi exceeded Rs. 20,000/month (approx. \$229), and for anything less than this amount, she was only willing to consider an open-relationship.

Khwaja siras did not blindly follow their lover's instructions, and when partners were unreasonably overbearing, they managed to circumvent authority by playing games with them. For instance, many admitted to secretly engaging in sex work without the knowledge of their lovers. This enabled them to earn extra money in addition to the stipends they received from them. For example, Kaisar found creative ways to bypass the rules imposed by her lovers.

I have two full-time partners right now (laughs). One is an old man (*budhā bābā*) and one is young. I have been with the old man for 10 years now. I love them both and they both cover my expenses. They don't know that I see them both. Once I was out with the old man and the younger one saw us together. Later when he asked me about the old man, I told him that he was my father (laughs). I spend time with the old man at my guru's house, and the other one comes to my house in Gizri. The old man used to put a lot of restrictions on me. He wouldn't let me talk to other boys. So I got another place in Gizri where I see the other one and do sex work. He doesn't know about it.

Kaisar's game of deception allowed her to maximize her earnings through two concomitant relationships. Her living arrangement enabled her to simultaneously maintain two lovers who supported her financially, while she performed sex work on the side. Many khwaja siras maintained secrets from oppressive partners, and evaded the stigma associated with sex work through deceptive techniques that enabled them to earn unhindered.

Importantly, some giriyās managed to exert control even when they did not financially support or were financially dependent upon their khwaja sira partners. A few older informants

reported giving money to their lovers in exchange for their time and loyalty. Reema's man rarely visited her unless she coddled him with cash and gifts. I also heard about giryās who served as pimps, provided their lovers with a regular stream of clients, and lived off their earnings. When asked why a khwaja sira would want to be in a relationship with a controlling and exploitative partner, Payal responded: "This heart of ours is really soft. When it settles on a lover, it makes us do all kinds of things."

### Lover's Marriage and Family

The relationship experiences of khwaja siras were limited due to social stigma. Payal explained how a khwaja sira and her lover were restricted in how and where they could express their feeling of togetherness.

A man can have ten women friends but having even one khwaja sira friend can be a problem for him. It is a double problem because he cannot go anywhere with her. He can't openly tell anyone that he is in love with a khwaja sira. They cannot roam around together the way he can take his wife or a girl out to enjoy. People will make fun of him. Sometimes I feel very suffocated by this.

The lack of social acceptance of the relationship between a man and a gender ambiguous person limited the expression of their love to certain spaces, behind closed doors or constrained to khwaja sira cultural venues.

Khwaja siras were cognizant of the transience of their relationships with men. They lacked faith in them because these unions were socially and religiously prohibited, and consequently tended to be short-lived. Many relationships ended when the giryā reached marriageable age and was wedded to a woman. Some khwaja siras were cynical about relationships with men. Noor claimed to have given up on the prospect of being committed to a man due to her disenchantment with such relationships.

These relationships don't last. Some might even go on for 20-30 years, but eventually they have to end. When men and women who are married to one another and who have children get divorced, then what is there to hold a khwaja sira and a man together. It's better not to have such friendships. It's better to take care of yourself in a way that you never need such a friend.

Noor was among many khwaja siras who failed to see the point of love relationships since men were eventually bound to leave them for women. The importance of marriage and reproduction made heteronormative nuptials essential and unavoidable. Khwaja siras were well aware of their inability to replace women given their incapacity to bear children even if they changed their sex through SRS. Shazia had internalized and accepted that her boyfriend, Sajid, would eventually marry a woman.

If he gets married, then I am quite alright with it. Obviously, his family will get him married. This is a reality that you cannot fight. If you start fretting about it, then you won't even get to enjoy the good times that you're having with him right now. There is no man who will not get married. If you have someone who loves you, supports you, takes care of you...even these qualities are really good in the world we live in.

Khwaja siras recurrently emphasized the inevitability of their partner's impending matrimony.

Interestingly, some played an important role in facilitating the union between their partners and their wives. This often involved picking out a suitable bride, making wedding arrangements, and even financing the wedding. During fieldwork, I attended Sapna's partner Zaheer's wedding, which had been arranged and financed entirely by Sapna. She picked out the bride, who lived a couple of doors down from her house, and had her khwaja sira family and friends assist her with the wedding preparations. In addition, Sapna rented a small house for the couple, which was conveniently located behind her own rental. On the eve of the wedding, I asked Sapna how she felt about her partner's marriage. In response, a teary-eyed Sapna indicated the break in her relationship with her partner by drawing an imaginary heart in the air before running a knife through it. "We're broken," she added for emphasis.



Sapna considered it her responsibility to get Zaheer married off since she was the one who “ruined” him by getting him involved in vice. She wanted to steer him back to the path of respectability. Sapna, like many others I knew, did not want to be responsible for depriving their partner of the right to marry and reproduce. In addition, she wanted to offset some of her own sins by bringing two people together in holy matrimony, which was believed to be a meritorious deed. Sapna’s response indicates her internal conflict between her desire for a lover and her conviction that having one was against Islamic precepts. This was the paradox of the lives of khwaja siras; on the one hand they yearned to be in long-term relationships with men and, on the other hand, they believed that such a lifestyle was forbidden. By executing the wedding, Sapna and her khwaja sira family also earned the respect of their neighbors by performing the admirable deed of getting two people married. Such commendable public presentations enabled khwaja siras to promote a positive self-image as decent and honorable people.

### The Power of the Curse

Blessing and cursing were among the few culturally instituted forms of power that khwaja siras were believed to possess. Although informants were generally ambivalent about whether or not they held special powers, many had personally witnessed their potency. Khwaja siras attributed the source and efficacy of the curse to the sheer force of their supplications, whether noble or vindictive, which they believed were heard by God. “Sometimes Allah listens to things that come from the heart, even if they come from the heart of a sinner,” said Bilal, who believed that the utter misery of the day-to-day existence of khwaja siras (and other oppressed people), was what enabled them to effectively implore for divine intervention. In other words, the strength of a khwaja sira’s entreaty and subsequent retribution through celestial intercession

corresponded with the extent of the violence meted out on her. However, gender ambiguous people often took advantage of the widespread belief in their curse in situations that involved no threat of violence.

It was the power of the curse that drove some families to reluctantly accept the illicit relationship between their sons/brothers/husbands and their khwaja sira lovers. I was initially suspicious of such claims until Nadia took me to her partner's parental home. When a sudden bout of fever prevented Azeem from getting groceries for his family, Nadia volunteered to purchase and have them personally delivered to his house. When we arrived, Azeem was resting in bed with his parents by his side. Two of his sisters were also present along with a bunch of small children. The family appeared to be well acquainted with Nadia and seemed quite comfortable with her. One of the sisters asked her to tailor a new outfit for her and Nadia promised to make her something nice. When Nadia announced that she wanted to take Azeem to her house, his mother, worried about her son's health, politely requested Nadia to let him rest at home until he had fully recovered. Nadia insisted that she would take good care of him, and the two continued to negotiate for a while until his sister changed topics. When we finally got up to leave, Nadia asked Azeem if he wanted to come along. Azeem immediately jumped to his feet while his defeated mother watched in silence. Nadia was beaming with joy by the time the three of us were out the door. She said, "See, what a strong influence I have over his household?" Nadia was pleased that I got to witness her standing among her "in-laws," who I later discovered were afraid of her curse. Khwaja siras wielded a certain amount power as a result of the widespread cultural belief that they bore the ability to bless and curse.

Similarly, Meena described how the fear of the khwaja sira curse offered her some control in her partner's household.

I live mostly at my friend's house...with his wife and children...His wife knows. She doesn't say anything to me. If he beats me, she gets angry at him. She tells him not to hit me. She says that we are ascetics and our curse will be upon them.

Meena had succeeded in installing herself in her partner's conjugal home partly due to his wife's fear of her curse. Some had managed to establish positive relationships with their partner's wives, owing to the prevalent belief that khwaja siras possessed special abilities. Using the threat of their curse was among of the repertoire of games that khwaja siras played with the general public. They exploited this cultural notion as a means of accessing power that was withheld from them. Although many were uncertain of their own unique ability, they were careful not to reveal their personal doubts about its efficacy to their oppressors. Instead, they misled the public by upholding the myth of the curse in order to retain influence over the normative world from which they were largely excluded.

The following vignettes provide further details about the role of the curse in empowering khwaja siras.

Malka: Whenever people wrong me, I see bad things happen to them. Once this guy teased me. I cursed him all night long. In the morning, I heard that the cops arrested him. He was imprisoned for a year. When he returned, he teased me again and I cursed him from my heart. Then, right in front of my eyes, he was hit by a motorcycle.

Harvest in Punjab: When Payal went to Punjab during the wheat season, she used to accompany khwaja siras on their daily rounds of wheat collection. Together they would go from house-to-house to gather wheat. According to Payal, villagers were simpletons who were terrified of the khwaja sira curse. Gender ambiguous people often took advantage of this fear by extorting wheat contributions from village residents.

Gender ambiguous people utilized the curse not only to find justice but also to exploit people.

Some wished ill upon their oppressors to seek retribution for injustices, while others played lay people merely by using the threat of their curse in order to gain undue advantage over them.

Hence, the curse was among the illusory acts that khwaja siras used in interactions with ordinary people.

## Men and Violence

See, when people don't give us an outlet, when the things that are available to other people are not given to us, I feel very suffocated. Even in the open air I feel suffocated. And then I feel like choking those who make me feel that way. Whenever something bad happens with me, I scream. But if they still try to repress me, then my heart aches. –Payal

Our society uses us for sex, makes us dance at weddings, brings us into their homes to bless babies, and gate crash our parties. But they also say we are dirty, that we do dirty things, that we shouldn't live in their neighborhoods, that we ruin their children, and that we should be locked up or drowned or killed. The same people who fuck our assholes blame us for spreading vulgarity and immorality. –Ameera

These excerpts capture the degree of oppression and marginalization experienced by khwaja siras, which correlated with the stigma attached to gender non-conformity in Pakistani society. Khwaja siras suffered verbal and physical abuse from nuclear and extended family members, from peers at school, neighbors, coworkers, law enforcement, male partners, clients, gurus and from society at large. They were excluded from their familial circles, from residential areas, and employment opportunities. Here, I discuss the abuse they experienced in schools, by law enforcement, and by men in general.

The low retention of gender ambiguous youth in schools was a product of both poverty and harassment from fellow students. While some gender variant children started working at an early age to support their families, others dropped out of school due to abuse at the hands of classmates.

Nargis: Boys used to call me “Khusrah! Khusrah!” during half time. They would tease me because my way of walking was bad. I didn't like going to school, so my father put his foot on my neck and my crushed my vocal chords. When my voice became bad, the boys started teasing me even more. I was so ashamed that I stopped going after class 8.

Hajra: When I was in school, I used to paint my nails with markers, and I would carry a ladies' bag. I had a girlish style. The principal noticed that I was different, so she casted

me as Anarkali<sup>70</sup> for the farewell party play. I was in class 7. She dressed me up as Anarkali and applied full makeup on my face. Then after that the boys at school drove me insane. They started pulling me into classrooms. Whenever I would go to the washroom, ten boys would come after me. All this drove me mad. Then teachers started escorting me. I would walk to school early with a teacher from my neighborhood. But after school, I would go home alone, and boys would catch me, pull my shirt and break the buttons. I was a kid at that time. I didn't know what to do. Eventually, they committed sin with me. Then I stopped going to school.

Both Nargis and Hajra were subjected to extreme violence during their school years, which eventually led them to forsake their education to escape persecution. With this commenced a cycle of abuse and deprivation: genderqueer youth abandoned their education as a result of daily torture at school, which in turn augmented their marginality in adult life and limited job prospects.

In public spaces, khwaja siras attracted attention by their mere presence. Many reported experiencing a sense of shame when walking out of their homes. "When I go out of the house, the kind of looks I get, make me feel a sense of shame, as though I am not even a third gender but of some fourth kind," said Shani. Although many grew accustomed to people staring at them, and some even enjoyed the attention, others despised being constantly under the microscope. Late one evening, Payal, Shani, Shazia, Maria and I took a taxi to the Pathan-dominated Shireen Jinnah Colony to attend Hasi's student's initiation ceremony. When we reached the outskirts of the colony, Payal asked the driver to park the car while she called Hasi for further directions to her house. In the meantime, we were swarmed by a large group of children who began stoning the car and hurling insults. One of them pulled Shani's hair, who moments later slipped into a state of panic and began to scream. A nearby group of male spectators incited the children to continue the assault. Fearing the worst, Payal yelled at the driver to bolt out of the colony. The children chased after the taxi until we were at a safe distance from the settlement. Such instances

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<sup>70</sup> A legendary courtesan from Lahore who lived during the rule of Mughal emperor, Akbar.

of violence were routine occurrences.

Those who begged and blessed for a living tended to respond differently to sexual violence than did khwaja sira sex workers, for whom such incidents were routine trade hazards.

Below, two mendicants describe their experiences of sexual assault.

Tina: When I go out to beg, sometimes people tell me that they will give me money if I let them touch me. I don't like this at all. It is a sin both for me and for them when I ask for money in the name of Allah and they ask for such things.

Neelam: This one time I was returning home from begging at 1 o'clock in the morning. I literally collected one-one rupee notes for hours and then as I was heading home, I ran into a bunch of gangster boys. They teased me so much. They tore my clothes off and made me dance naked. They said, "Go! Who is there to listen to you?" And they were right. We have no one who will listen to us. My heart broke so badly that day. I felt like touching electricity and killing myself or drowning in the ocean.

Khwaja sira beggars were deeply affected by sexual harassment because they intentionally distanced themselves from sinful acts with the intention of leading a respectable life. Narratives of violence contextualize the games of secrecy and deception that gender ambiguous people played with the public. Although it appeared that khwaja siras took undue advantage of lay people, it is essential to apprehend that much of this game-playing was a reaction to the violence meted out on them. In contrast, some khwaja siras reinforced the dominant belief that sex workers deserved mistreatment. This view held that those who had self-respect received respect from others, while those who were involved in immorality invited persecution. Accordingly, blame was laid upon the victim instead of the oppressor. Khwaja siras who endorsed this perspective, blamed sex workers for ruining their reputation and for spreading social ills.

The thugs and gangsters of Karachi regularly victimized khwaja siras. Such men were known as *bīlā* in Farsi. I learned that there was a prominent network of *bīlās* in Karachi. Among them was a noteworthy figure named Nisar, a stocky man in his fifties who sported a thick moustache and dyed jet-black hair. Nisar was known for his cruelty towards khwaja siras, and

was particularly infamous for his signature punishment of shaving the heads of those who disobeyed him. According to rumors, Nisar had a wall display in his house where he showcased the hair of each of his conquests. His brutality helped him gain notoriety among the lovers and admirers of khwaja siras who had begun approaching him for help in moderating disputes involving gender ambiguous people. For instance, a man could call a meeting if he suspected that his khwaja sira partner was having an affair with another man. In such a situation, both the khwaja sira in question and her secret lover were forcibly taken to Nisar who controlled their fate with appropriate punishments. Rather than standing up to him, khwaja siras respected Nisar in fear of incurring his disfavor. My first encounter with him was at Puja's birthday party where he had been invited as a chief guest. Some khwaja siras at the event paid their respects to Nisar by kissing his cheek while others prostrated before him to kiss his hands.

Police harassment had dropped significantly but had not entirely disappeared in the years since the Pakistani state granted rights and protections to khwaja siras. Verbal and sexual harassment and extortion at the hands of policemen were commonplace. One day as we left Nadia's house, Meera said, "A couple of years ago it wouldn't even be possible for you and I to walk together so freely because the cops would have harassed us and accused you of being a client." Despite the improvement in the status of khwaja siras, Meera felt the need to cover her head as we walked past a police patrol unit. Similarly, other gender ambiguous people erred on the side of caution to avoid unnecessary confrontations with local law enforcement. In addition, the police were known to disrupt khwaja sira parties if they do not receive a cash bribe. Payal intervened when a police patrol car pulled up next to the roadside tent where Nighat's birthday party was taking place. The police officers offered "protection" in exchange for petty cash. After protracted negotiations, they settled on Rs. 500, and then continued to watch over the party until

it winded down around 3am. “Prior to the court’s orders, the same cops would have shut down the party,” said Payal, “but now they are at least willing to cooperate.”

Drug use was widespread among khwaja siras. Marijuana joints were regularly shared and copiously consumed in the homes of most informants. Farzana said that she used drugs to drown her sorrows. In light of the daily discrimination and violence that khwaja siras experienced, it is hardly surprising that drugs acted as a crutch to alleviate the misery of everyday life. Although drugs momentarily assuaged the burdens of existence, they also pushed khwaja siras deeper into a state of apathy surrounding their grim conditions.

### **Neighbors and Neighborhood**

Finding and retaining a residence was an arduous task for khwaja siras since they were not welcome in most residential neighborhoods, including colonies and shantytowns. Landlords were typically reluctant to rent property to them and neighbors treated them with contempt. People feared the deleterious influence of khwaja siras on their neighborhoods: What if our children join their ranks? What if our men engage in immoral activity with them? What if they put a curse upon us? The negative public perception of khwaja siras led to their exclusion from various arenas of social life, including residential spaces.



**Figure 9.** Three different slums in Karachi that were home to khwaja siras.



The neighborhoods that khwaja siras called home were some of the most unsanitary and dangerous areas of Karachi. These slums were lined with piles of garbage, open sewage streams, meandering dirt streets, dug up pavements, and uncemented brick houses. Amid the chaos of vehicles and pedestrians, the little civic sense that sustained some semblance of order on main city streets was lost the minute one stepped foot into these colonies. Most shantytowns were ravaged by crime, gang wars and political party disputes, and neighborhood thugs routinely targeted and victimized khwaja siras. And yet these slums contained the sense of intimacy and solidarity that is characteristic of the mohallah (neighborhood) in South Asia (Verkaaik 2009, 71-2). Although khwaja sira migrants from rural areas generally enjoyed the low cost of living in these colonies, they complained about being excluded from “decent” neighborhoods.

The urban experiences of khwaja siras dwelling in Karachi’s slums shed light on their everyday negotiation and identity representation practices. Rather than contesting oppressive social norms, khwaja siras reproduced social relations in order to maintain respectability. They engaged in games of secrecy and deception in order to uphold a positive self-image and to access power in their neighborhoods.

### Livelihood and Neighbors

The neighborhoods where khwaja siras lived were not only their homes but also their workplace. The homes of khwaja sira sex workers were typically their place of business, that is, where they entertained clients, and their neighborhoods and surrounding environs were where they earned by going from door to door to beg and confer blessings. Hence, maintaining a relationship of goodwill with the men, women and children of the mohallah enabled khwaja siras to maintain their residence and their livelihood. Khwaja siras who begged in their localities usually managed

to forge close ties with the neighborhood women. They regularly visited these women in their homes and shared local gossip with them. Unlike most neighborhood men, khwaja siras were granted admission into the domestic quarters of women because they were not perceived as a sexual threat. “We go to people’s homes,” said Tina, “and the women tell us their stories. They openly tell us everything, all their gossip, all their problems, even the sexual ones.”

### Retaining Space

The *ḍerās* or homes of khwaja siras differed in size depending on the number of occupants. Single occupant *ḍerās* were typically no bigger than a small room, but it was not uncommon for such spaces to be inhabited by more than one khwaja sira. Many gurus who had two to three student residents were able to afford two room rentals in shantytowns. The material circumstances of gender ambiguous people varied by income, with professional sex workers earning the most and enjoying a better standard of living. Televisions and music systems were staples in the homes of average khwaja siras since they were necessary for entertaining and socializing. Those who managed to retain long-term residence in certain neighborhoods owned bigger items, such as refrigerators and heavy furniture. Most homes were decorated with light furnishings, including floor mattresses, cushions, carpets and curtains.

When khwaja siras managed to find a place to live, they had to make a dedicated effort not to risk losing the property. For instance, when I met her, Nadia had been living at her current residence for the past six years. Her guru had been pressuring her to move to a nicer neighborhood where the two could cohabitate, but Nadia was unwilling to leave her mohallah because she had finally managed to establish a positive reputation among her neighbors. She was reluctant to start over in a new place since she had been unlucky in the vicinities where she had

previously lived. One night Nadia was escorting me out of her colony when we ran into a wedding procession. One of the men in the group spotted Nadia and walked over to embrace her. Nadia turned me to and said, “Faris Bhāī, this is the groom! He’s getting married today.” Then she turned back to the groom and said, “Why didn’t you call to tell me you were getting married today? I had to hear from someone else.” The groom said apologetically, “I’m sorry. We were so ill-prepared.” His mother joined us and added, “Everything happened so suddenly.” Then the groom and his mother entreated Nadia to attend the wedding and Nadia promised to be there. As we walked away from the groom’s entourage, Nadia excitedly said to me, “Did you see the kind of respect I get in this neighborhood? This is why I don’t want to leave this place.”

### Earning Respect

Not unlike the hijras in Reddy’s study in Hyderabad, India, khwaja siras in Karachi “emphasized ways to assert and maintain their izzat” (2005, 18) in order to circumvent the detrimental impacts of the stigma associated with non-heteronormativity. Khwaja siras had to preserve an image of respectability in their mohallahs because they were perceived as symbols of immorality. Tina said that she was spared from eviction when her neighbors decided to drive out the khwaja sira residents in her lane. “When they came for me, my landlord told them that there is a world of difference between me and the other khadras...So it was decided that I would stay, but everyone else was removed.” Similarly, Nadia bragged about her standing among her neighbors: “I’ve built my respect in my neighborhood. My respect is worth *lākh* of rupees.”

Khwaja siras earned the respect of neighbors by engaging in acts that reinforced the dominant social structure. This included religious observance and the enactment of morally laudable behavior. Nazo experienced difficulties wherever she lived, but her situation improved

once she began to pray and read the Quran. “I go to the mosque to offer prayers on Friday. The people in my neighborhood get very happy when they see a khwaja sira at the mosque, and children from the neighborhood come to my house to read the Quran.” Nazo also regularly held *Korān khwāni*<sup>71</sup> and *niāz*<sup>72</sup> at her house. Some genderqueer people exceeded social expectations in order to carve personal space in the mohallah. To this end, Reema helped a neighbor by adopting and raising one of her children, which improved her status as a doer of good deeds. Additionally, khwaja siras provided financial support to neighbors in times of need, assisted in getting their children married, and helped to resolve communal conflicts.

In addition, respect was established by covering involvement in vice. Khwaja siras who did not use their homes for sex work often told me that their neighbors respected them because they never saw strange men enter their home. Those who engaged in sex work at home typically entertained clients from other vicinities and avoided contact with the men from their own neighborhoods. Noor also stressed the importance of avoiding sexual ties with neighbors.

I’ve never liked having neighbors at my house...If you keep them away, then they won’t have the guts to disrespect you. So I keep myself in check. Also, I think to myself, I go to the homes in my neighborhood to beg, and so I shouldn’t have the same men over at my house. Otherwise, what respect will they give me?

Upholding respect among neighbors was essential for khwaja siras since their residence and livelihood depend on it.

### Engendered Experiences

At the time of this investigation, khwaja siras living in certain shantytowns in Karachi, particularly in areas that had recently experienced an influx of Pashtun migrants, had begun to

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<sup>71</sup> A religious gathering in which people recite parts of the Quran.

<sup>72</sup> A religious offering involving the distribution of food, and often made on behalf of the deceased.

face social pressures that are typically experienced by women. In these neighborhoods, the norms of modesty, spatial segregation and mobility that mostly apply to the public behavior of women were being imposed on khwaja siras. These social processes were the effects of the tribalization of certain urban enclaves, which, coupled with party politics, were increasingly being governed by the traditions of the resident's distant hometowns.



**Figure 10.** Gulabo posing in her guru's 'abāaiya (cloak).

One day, I was at Payal's house when Hasi arrived with her lover. I was surprised to see Hasi dressed in a black 'abāaiya (a full body cloak worn by women in parts of the Muslim world) since it is rare for khwaja siras to be completely covered up. I learned that Hasi's partner rode her to Payal's house on his motorcycle, and that the two did not want to be judged or harassed by the people in their neighborhood, by onlookers on the streets, or by cops along the way. Hasi lived in a fairly conservative Pathan dominated neighborhood in Kimari where khwaja siras were regular victims of harassment. "So it is better for us to be dressed modestly," she said.

Similarly, Tina responded to the changing ethnic composition of her locality by conforming to the expectations of her neighbors.

Now, what's started happening in my lane is that whenever there's a power outage, the khadras here sit outside on *charpais* and laugh loudly. They have such long hair and they keep it open. These Pathan men sit in front of them and they show them their breasts. We can't call ourselves khadras if we sit outside with men. We're men if we sit outside. When we decide to grow our hair and become like women, then we should sit at home like women. Respect is respect. Even when the light goes out, I sit inside my house.

As liminal beings who were neither men nor women, khwaja siras generally enjoyed easy access to both genders since the norms of segregation did not apply to them. However, Tina demonstrated a tacit acceptance and reinforcement of the spatial separation of khwaja siras expected by the men in her neighborhood. Rather than freely socializing with her friends and neighbors, she confined herself to her home. Moreover, she was frustrated by the immodest behavior of the khwaja siras in her street whose actions risked damaging the reputation of "decent" gender ambiguous people like herself. The spatial segregation between men and khwaja siras reinforced the power and privilege of men over both women and gender ambiguous people, and exacerbated the subjugation of this already marginalized group.

Other khwaja siras described similar engendered experiences in their neighborhoods and in other parts of the city. Naima's experiences below speak to her awareness of the general public's negative attitude towards khwaja siras.

Whenever I go out to get groceries, I buy whatever I need and then quickly return home, because if I'm standing outside at night, people will wonder what I'm doing. I feel really weird about that...I feel bad because of the clothes I wear. Even if we don't do sin, people still think badly about us because of how we look. There are so many men who do bad things but they go undetected...which is why if I had a choice I would want to be a man because being a woman comes with a lot of problems too. You have to live within your four walls. A man can sit outside whenever he wants...but a woman cannot.

The experiences of khwaja siras like Hasi, Tina and Naima centered on their manifest sexuality, which was visibly mapped onto their bodies. Dominant social attitudes towards them constantly played on their psyche and influenced their actions. Hijras and zennanas reproduced social

oppression by self-policing their public behavior. These adjustments were essential for those striving to maintain dignity in Karachi's evolving ethnic environment.

### Deceptive Agency

The portrayal of khwaja siras as oppressed people reveals as much as it conceals. Gender variant Karachiites had a keen understanding of social norms and of the way in which they were perceived by mainstream society, and they often used this knowledge to their advantage. Rather than readily conforming to oppressive norms, khwaja siras often exercised deceptive agency, that is, their "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001, 112) in a disingenuous manner. These everyday practical strategies did not veer away from locally defined value (Peletz 1995, 351) even as they reproduced social relations (Giddens 1984). By identifying gaps within and manipulating the social structure, khwaja siras were able to fulfill their desires without compromising the overall integrity of the gender stratification system.

The outward appearance of respectability masked their private sexual behavior and allowed khwaja siras to escape persecution. Nazo highlighted the importance of exercising caution when acting upon her sexual needs. "We're Muslim and it is wrong for people to have sex openly," she said. "Therefore, if you're going to commit sin, you must do it behind closed doors in order to keep your respect." Following this statement, Nazo described how she managed to sustain a clandestine relationship with her former lover.

I used to have a lover, and whenever he would come over, I would ask him whether or not any one saw him. I would lock the door after he'd come inside. Then we would eat together before making our faces black. In the morning...I would peer out onto the street to make sure no one was present, and he would leave if the coast were clear. One day as he was leaving, my neighbor saw him and asked me who he was. I lied to her. I told her that he was my cousin who lives in Hyderabad, but because he sometimes works late in Karachi, I let him sleep over at my place...My neighbor said that it was nice of me to help him out. If I had told the truth, she would have lost respect for me.

On the one hand, Nazo's use of the phrase "making our faces black" (*mun kālā karnā*) indicates her belief that illegitimate sexual contact led to loss of self-respect. On the other hand, her agency is evident in the fable she narrated to her neighbor, which not only allowed her to maintain her liaison with her lover right under their noses, but also helped her preserve her self-image as a caring individual. Her public façade of propriety served as a veil for private promiscuous acts, and enabled her to satisfy her needs without disrupting social norms.

While Nazo's agential act took the shape of damage control, Nadia engaged in a kind of preventive gaming, that is, a precautionary measure to preserve her reputation and her mobility.

When I first moved into this neighborhood, the men here would make fun of me all the time. But now no one says anything to me, and they all respect me. My status improved after I managed to seduce and fuck some of these men. Now many of them are afraid that I will tell others about what I did to them.

Nadia exhibits a clear manipulation of sociocultural norms by using them as a bargaining chip against her oppressors. Being the receptive partner lowers a man's social status and casts doubt on his masculinity. Nadia used the cultural knowledge that it was degrading and shameful for a man to be sexually penetrated to her benefit. By seducing and penetrating these men in private, she managed to gain power over them in exchange for keeping their secrets out of the public domain.

Dapne Spain writes that "[s]patial segregation is one of the mechanisms by which a group with greater power can maintain its advantage over a group with less power," and that "[b]y controlling access to knowledge...through the control of space, the dominant group's ability to retain and reinforce its position is enhanced" (2005, 49). Nadia demonstrates that the less powerful can unsettle power dynamics by gaining access to the dominant group's private information. Previously, Nadia avoided neighborhood spaces occupied by her oppressors in



order to escape harassment from them. However, by controlling knowledge of these men's private acts, she enhanced her social position, reclaimed access to these spaces, and collapsed the spatial boundaries that contributed to her unequal status. On the one hand, Nadia's ambiguous gender enabled her to meander between the spaces of both men and women. On the other hand, through her game of manipulation, she managed to simultaneously cheat and reproduce the system by stifling the cycle of ridicule yet maintaining her subjugated thirdness within the gendered constitution of society.

The urban experiences of khwaja siras dwelling in Karachi's slums included such acts of secrecy, deception and misrepresentation. Rather than contesting the cultural norms of spatial segregation and male privilege, khwaja siras consciously reproduced social relations through subtle interventions in order to maintain respectability, to protect their livelihood, and to retain their residence. The everyday identity politics of khwaja siras hinged on projecting a deceptive public self-image that was meant to neutralize the stereotype of the depraved khwaja sira.

### **Livelihood**

Khwaja siras were generally from lower class backgrounds, and most received very little formal education. Employers were typically unwilling to hire them due to the stigma associated with gender/sexual nonnormativity. The few who managed to find employment emphasized the difficulty in retaining jobs on account of routine harassment from coworkers. These factors led to the economic marginalization of khwaja siras, who subsequently, turned to the field for livelihood opportunities. In addition to offering a safe social sphere where gender ambiguous people could coexist, the field provided a number of economic opportunities to its members, including begging, singing and dancing, blessing newborns and newly married couples, and sex

work. These livelihood patterns were essential to the survival of khwaja siras. This economic system was not self-contained since it functioned by providing services to the larger society. It connected gender ambiguous people to the general public, and many of the interactions between them took place on the job.

### Rural Exodus and Livelihood

Karachi had gained a reputation among khwaja siras as an ideal place to earn. Interlocutors described the city as the “London of Pakistan” and the “mother of the poor.” Many gender ambiguous people from rural Pakistan migrated to other big cities, such as Lahore and Rawalpindi where they were able to earn a living in relative anonymity from their familial networks. The social structure of modern society permits a high degree of secrecy (Ritzer and Goodman 2003). Given the sexualized nature of their culture, khwaja siras intentionally hid aspects of their lives from natal kin. Maintaining secrecy was feasible for gender ambiguous people within the urban setting of contemporary Karachi. The city afforded them a comfortable level of privacy given its physical distance from their rural hometowns. Migrant khwaja siras included both long- and short-term residents. Those who had permanently moved to Karachi regularly visited their natal villages and sent home remittances. Many were long-time residents of the city, but planned on retiring in their hometowns and villages. Others were seasonal workers who came to Karachi once or twice a year for a couple of months at a time. In addition to rural migrants, the city’s khwaja sira population consisted of native Karachiites. While conducting daily economic activities, those born and raised in they city had to take greater precaution to cover their involvement in unrespectable work from relatives.

## Begging and Blessing

Known as *ṭolī* in khwaja sira vernacular, begging (*dhīngnā*) and blessing (*vadhāī*) were crucial khwaja sira livelihood practices. Khwaja siras believed that they had been permitted to live off the land through begging and blessing by royal decree when they lost their stately functions in the courts of Mughal emperors. Begging was a fairly lucrative source of income for khwaja siras. Informants reported earning between Rs. 400-1,200 (approx. \$5-14) each day through begging (i.e., Rs. 12,000-36,000/month, approx. \$137-411). This monthly earning potential was much higher than the minimum monthly wage rate of Rs. 7,000-8,000 (approx. \$80-91), as determined by the Pakistani government in 2011 for unskilled workers (Minimum Wage Report: Pakistan). Hence, contrary to the stereotype of abject poverty associated with khwaja siras, gender ambiguous Pakistanis could live above the poverty line through begging alone. However, daily earnings varied depending on the type of neighborhood and the amount of time spent begging. While some khwaja siras began work early in the mornings and traversed several neighborhoods during their daily rounds, others started work in the afternoons and spent merely a few hours begging houses, offices, shops, and fruit carts. Begging involved excessive walking, and contrary to the popular belief that it was an easy way out of honest hard work, it required much diligence and discipline.

Begging was fraught with problems because it was highly stigmatized work. On the one hand, it was illegal<sup>73</sup> and selectively enforced, and on the other hand, it was religiously forbidden but also permitted in cases of dire necessity. Khwaja sira mendicants argued that they had to

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<sup>73</sup> Begging is illegal in Pakistan according to the West Pakistan Vagrancy Ordinance, 1958. The said Ordinance states that “[a]ny police officer may without an order from a magistrate and without a warrant, arrest and search any person who appears to him to be a vagrant and may seize anything found on or about such person which he has reason to believe to be liable to confiscation under this Ordinance.”

resort to begging professionally because no one was willing to hire genderqueer people. Given that begging was acceptable only in times of acute need, khwaja siras maintained the façade of poverty in order to continue begging without compromising their image of self-respectability. However, experiencing humiliation and harassment while begging was not uncommon. For instance, asking for alms was prohibited during *Ramzān* (the holy month of fasting for Muslims), and during this time, police harassment of khwaja sira mendicants increased. Informants reported being arrested or picked up by police patrol vans, having their valuables and earnings confiscated, and being dropped off in deserted areas along the outskirts of Karachi.

Some khwaja siras, especially those who were new to the field, claimed that they were ashamed to beg. “When people say things to me...I become very *disheart* for a couple of minutes, but then I have to continue begging again,” said Shahana. Shahana was not accustomed to the daily insults and humiliation that accompanied begging. However, experienced khwaja siras like Moti had grown comfortable asking for alms.

Begging is nothing to be proud of. It is shameful. But I have become stubborn since I have been doing it for years. Initially, I used to feel ashamed. And now...I know how to deal with people and maintain my respect.

Moti, who had been begging for twenty years, was no longer afraid of retaliating with insults when faced with opposition. Hijra begging techniques included flirting, shouting, dancing, clapping and cursing. The very appearance of khwaja siras was cause for embarrassment, and usually the threat of being shamed by one was enough for most people to cooperate.

Blessings entailed sanctifying the birth of a newborn (typically the birth of a male child) and the union of a newly married couple. Blessings were meant to bestow good luck on and to ensure the wellbeing of a newborn or the success and longevity of and fertility in a marriage. Khwaja siras heard about childbirths and marriages in their neighborhoods either through word

of mouth or direct invitation, and they visited relevant households in small groups consisting of a guru and a few of her disciples. In the case of childbirth, the khwaja siras examined the genitals of the infant to verify their development. This practice was in keeping with the myth that khwaja siras seized hermaphroditic infants from parents. In reality, none of my research participants had come across an intersexual child let alone take possession of one from parents. Nonetheless, the threat of seizure provided them some power over the public. During these visits, khwaja siras held the male child and sang lullabies before making demands for money and gifts. The amount received was divided into equal shares (*bakhrā*) between the khwaja siras involved.<sup>74</sup>

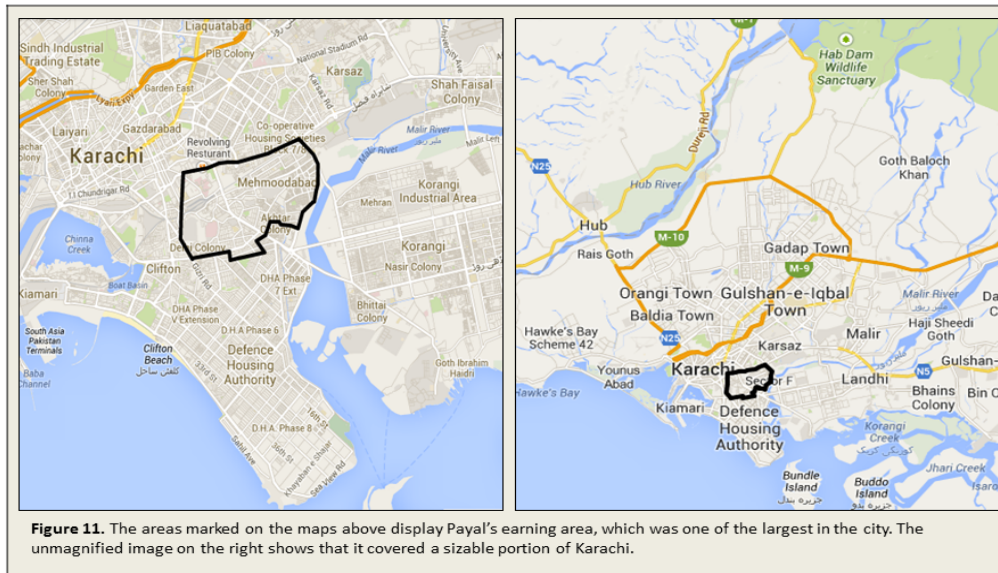
### *Earning Areas*

Most hijra kin groups had designated earning areas (*vīrat*) where non-family members were not permitted to earn. These regions included the commercial and residential streets of colonies and shantytowns, while major city thoroughfares were excluded. Earning areas could be as small as minute sections of colonies or as large as several subdivisions of Karachi.

Those found begging or blessing in an area that did not belong to their family risked being physically attacked or fined by the rightful owners of the said neighborhood. Some migrant khwaja siras and most seasonal visitors did not have access to earning areas if they were not members of one of the Karachi-based hijra households. These khwaja siras begged on main roads where anyone was allowed to work without restrictions. Family elders managed earning areas, whose membership and borders evolved over time.

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<sup>74</sup> Some money was set aside for *niāz* before the earnings were divided into equal shares. The concept of shares generally applied to the money that khwaja siras earned through group blessings. Typically, one share was for the guru, and the remaining shares for each of her disciples in the group. If the students lived in the guru's house, then an additional share went towards household expenses. In other words, if five individuals were in the group, the earnings were divided into six shares since the guru received two.



### *The Game Called Toli*

“The khwaja siras of today are the same as the saints of today,” said Nadia. “Both are frauds!” Nadia made this analogy in reference to khwaja sira livelihood practices. Her statement implies that khwaja siras earned a living by defrauding the general public into believing that they were intersexuals, and were therefore worthy of charity. Nadia indicates that both holy men and khwaja siras were charlatans since neither of them possessed the attributes that were central to their public identities. In Nadia’s statement is an implicit acquiescence of the dominant belief that “real” khwaja siras were born with genital irregularities. Rather than challenging the myth, Nadia reinforced the mainstream perception that those who possessed functioning male genitals were imposters.

Tricking the public into believing that they were intersexual was at the core of hijraness. During social interactions, gender ambiguous people demonstrated their shrewdness by exploiting cultural stereotypes and perpetuating myths related to khwaja siras.

One day I was out begging and a woman told me that a khwaja sira stole her mobile phone. I asked her who it was and she said her name was Aina. I told her that Aina is a

man and not one of us, and that she should beat him up the next time she saw him. (laughs) Then, the other day, a khadra named Imran insulted me in my neighborhood, so I decided to get back at him. I took Meena, Zubi and Nammo with me to the house where Imran had talked badly about me. I said to the woman in the house, “Sister, what do all of us look like to you?” She said you all look like khusrahs. I told her that we’re all the same, but the next time Imran comes to her house, she should check him, and I told her how to do it smoothly and swiftly.

In the first instance, Nadia protected the reputation of the khwaja siras in her neighborhood by singling out Aina, the mobile thief, as an imposter. Nadia did not want the residents of her neighborhood to distrust khwaja siras merely due to the misconduct of one gender ambiguous person. In the second example, Nadia relied on her competence to get even with Imran for her misbehavior instead of retaliating with insults. In both cases, Nadia used her hijraness to target rival khwaja siras while simultaneously deceiving the general public by misrepresenting gender ambiguous people.

When khwaja siras went to people’s homes to beg and bless, they did so under false pretenses by defrauding the public into believing that they were intersexual khwaja siras. Intersexuality was religiously sanctioned based on the logic that it was a God-given condition. Mainstream society believed that intersexuals were truly deserving of charity since they were unable to reproduce and have marital relationships with women. In contrast, physical emasculation was believed to be prohibited in Islam. This was premised on the idea that altering the form in which God has created human beings is against divine will. Further, mainstream society believed that those with male genitals were men who voluntarily adorned women’s clothes in order to make a living through begging, blessing and sex-work. The notion that a khwaja sira could be someone who possessed a feminine soul was largely beyond the sociocultural purview. This soul, invisible to the naked eye, remained largely a socially unrecognized phenomenon even though khwaja siras described it as their most fundamental trait.

While the general public had a strong inkling that many of those who identified as khwaja siras either had male genitalia or were physically emasculated, social and religious norms prevented them from accepting such individuals as real khwaja siras.

In contrast, according to khwaja siras' own structuring of identities, any biological male who possessed a feminine soul qualified as a khwaja sira. Nevertheless, gender ambiguous people maintained the ruse of intersexuality since the general public did not consider biological males as real khwaja siras. Hence, rather than challenging society's presumptions, khwaja siras concealed their corporeal status and deceived their benefactors into believing that they were intersexual, often in order to earn a living<sup>75</sup>. Hijras, since they were emasculated, were in a better position than zennanas to make a case of personal authenticity by exposing or threatening to expose their surgically altered genitals and misrepresenting them as God-given. Common among hijras in South Asia (Reddy 2003, 166), the practice of threatening to expose one's genitals was meant not only to shame onlookers but also to separate real khwaja siras from the phonies.

In her study, Reddy observes that hijras in India manipulated "popular cultural symbols...to legitimize their basis for (political) authority" (2003, 172). However, the crucial difference in representation between Indian hijras and Pakistani khwaja siras was that the former emphasized that they were operated ascetics, a portrayal that was linked to popular cultural symbols of the Hindu tradition (e.g., semen-loss anxiety and the culturally valued image of the *sanyasi* or renunciate) (2003, 175-6), while the latter projected themselves as

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<sup>75</sup> The hijras in Hossain's Bangladesh also engaged in the "art of concealing" their genital status, but their obfuscation took a very different form. Hossain describes this practice as a "performing art" wherein non-emasculated hijras literally tucked their penises between their thighs (2012, 501). Akin to the skills of hijraness among Pakistani khwaja siras, this physical act of concealment required great dexterity and was a matter of immense pride for Bangladeshi hijras.



intersexual/impotent ascetics, which was in keeping with Islamically accepted forms of genital non-normativity.

The following narrative demonstrates the role of secrecy and deception in khwaja sira livelihood practices. Below, Payal describes an incident where she masterfully passed as an intersexual and out-smarted her opponents in order to make money.

My grand-guru was the only one in our group who had been operated. I used to beg and confer blessings with her in our neighborhood. A bunch of us would go together in a group. But then I had a fight with them and they stopped taking me. They tried to kick me out of the earning area by telling the residents that I'm a boy and not a hijra. They thought that I would get scared and leave, but instead, I started roaming around the neighborhood in front of them. My grand-guru used to take 5-6 khwaja siras to Bezerta Lines, and I started following them. One day, they danced at someone's house and then demanded Rs. 700. That's when I showed up. I told them that if they take Rs. 600, then they would have to give me Rs. 100. Then my grand-guru stepped in and told the residents that they had thrown me out of the group because I am a boy. I said that that wasn't true and then I told them that she is my grand-guru, my senior, so lets leave her out of this, but why don't you go ahead and strip the rest of the khwaja siras in her group, and in the end you can strip me naked. If I turn out to be a boy, then you can throw shoes at me. Now I knew that those khwaja siras would never get naked because they all had boy parts. The residents of the house liked my idea. They said, "Well today lets find out what hijras are really like." My grand-guru chimed in again and said, "Child, just give her the money," and then she quickly fled the scene. When she left, I told the rest of the khwaja siras to either cooperate with me or else get ready to create a spectacle. So they agreed to cooperate, and I got Rs. 100. Afterwards, I told them to tell grand-guru to call me the next day or else I would do the same thing again.

In the above situation, Payal's skillful manipulation of the cultural myth that khwaja siras were intersexuals enabled her to fight adversity and to earn a living. She engaged in an identity politics that hinged on maintaining a deceptive public image of khwaja siras as socio-religiously acceptable. Payal exercised her agency to deceive not only the residents of her earning area but also her queer family members, while simultaneously reinforcing the dominant belief that those with male genitals were fake khwaja siras.

Misappropriating by being dishonest about one's corporeal status was common practice among khwaja siras in their everyday struggle to earn a living in an exclusionary environment

where employment was reserved for those who conformed to society's gender and sexual norms. Such games of deception were necessary in enabling khwaja siras to sustain a livelihood and to maintain their legitimacy and security. Misappropriation was a necessary survival skill for gender ambiguous people to subsist in a world where they had endured long-term discrimination and oppression.

### Functions

Functions refer to dance events and weddings where khwaja siras entertained audiences by dancing. Creating a spectacle by showering performers with rupee bills (*tamāshbenī*) was common at functions. At dance events, khwaja sira entertainers performed solo acts before male audiences, and found new clients for sex work<sup>76</sup>. At wedding functions, gender ambiguous people typically accompanied musicians (*marāsī*). For instance, Nadia's troupe consisted of one or two khwaja sira dancers and several musicians with whom she divided her earnings. Khwaja siras had a unique advantage over their *marāsī* colleagues due to their access to the women guests at weddings.

I enjoy singing to women, so sometimes I go to the women's side of the gathering and sing *maiya*s to them. Whatever money I make from the women, I hide it in my purse. When the *marāsīs* ask where I was, I tell them that I had gone to urinate.

Most weddings were gender-segregated and men were not allowed to enter the women's quarters. However, given their liminality, khwaja siras could easily move between the spaces of

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<sup>76</sup> Some khwaja sira dancers earned a reputation as dancers through their talent and business acumen. For instance, Reema's demand skyrocketed partly due to her shrewd marketing efforts, which involved producing several personal dance videos. In the recordings, Reema is seen dancing to popular Bollywood and Pakistani tunes in different scenic locations dressed a variety of striking outfits. In addition to earning through DVD sales, Reema's videos also served as marketing material to promote her talent for live performances.

both men and women. Nadia regularly frequented the women's section where she secretly performed for the guests, and hid her additional earnings from the rest of the troupe.

### Sexual Labor

Khwaja sira sex work exposes and challenges the polarities between oppression and liberation, violence and pleasure, and victimhood and agency. Sex work was a topic of secrecy in interactions between khwaja siras and outsiders. During interviews, many respondents denied participation in sex work in order to uphold the pretense of respectability. However, I had the distinct advantage of spending extended periods of time with informants and gradually discovering hidden truths about their lives. Covering one's involvement in sex work was meant to reduce discrimination and to promote personal security.

Sex work was motivated by extreme poverty and was often the example of employment set by khwaja sira elders. Although they were impoverished when they initially entered the field, khwaja siras were not as poor as they were believed to be, especially since sex work was a lucrative source of income. Many khwaja siras resorted to survival sex when they left their familial homes, only to find it increasingly difficult to quit sex work upon gaining financial stability. Abandoning paid sex was challenging for a number of reasons: 1) earnings through prostitution were significantly higher than other kinds of work; 2) it was less time consuming since more money could be earned in less time (e.g., a khwaja sira could earn Rs. 500 through one hour of sex work instead of spending six hours begging to earn the same amount); 3) sex work had a pleasure component while begging entailed receiving insults and miles of daily walking; 4) leaving sex work was difficult because khwaja siras lacked the professional skills for

other career paths; 5) some sexual health NGOs claimed that “sex addiction,”<sup>77</sup> which was believed to be common among sex workers, perpetuated a cycle of dependency upon the profession; and 6) many believed that forsaking prostitution was futile since they had already compromised their physical and spiritual purity.

### *Sexual Space and Network*

Khwaja siras engaged in sex work in their homes and/or out on the streets at night. Home-based sex workers tended to have a client base that was largely built on word of mouth (i.e., clients shared the cell phone numbers of sex workers and vice versa). In addition, the client pool expanded when khwaja siras came into contact with men while begging and dancing. Street-based work started mostly after dusk and continued all night. Khwaja siras stood on main city streets and around busy intersections in affluent neighborhoods of Karachi. There, they waited for customers to pull over in cars to pick them up. In 2011, the younger generation of genderqueer people in Lahore had started frequenting novel spaces to seek out potential clients. Fida, for instance, regularly visited several *shīshā* cafes (hookah bars) dressed in men’s clothes to be picked up by male patrons.

### *Sexuality and Sexual Practices*

Khwaja sira sex workers had sexual encounters with a variety of men, including heterosexual men, men who were exclusively attracted to khwaja siras, and certain gay-identifying men. The sexual practices of khwaja sira prostitutes varied and often reflected the wishes of their clients. Most customers were penetrative partners during sexual intercourse, but some enjoyed being

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<sup>77</sup> Here, sex addiction refers to compulsive sexual urges and an excessively frequent need for sexual gratification.

penetrated by the khwaja siras whose services they sought. Khwaja siras disparagingly referred to such individuals as *guptī*, that is, men who hid their desire to be sexually penetrated out of a sense of shame. While corporeally emasculated khwaja siras (*nirbān*) did not have the physical capacity to penetrate, those who possessed male genitals (*akvā*) complied with the demands of clients regardless of their own sexual desires. “See, I am a professional,” said Hasi. “I do whatever work I get. I do it when clients ask me, but my personal desires are those of woman.” Although some gender ambiguous people enjoyed penetrating, few were willing to admit it, and the ones who did, recalled the horror of having to do so.

### *Rates*

Informants reported charging clients anywhere between Rs. 150 and 7000 (approx. \$2-80) per client. Differences in service rates varied based on the following criteria: the demand/beauty of a sex worker, her long and/or short term monetary needs, the kinds of sexual services desired by the client, and the client’s affordability<sup>78</sup>. Due to rising competition and poverty, many khwaja siras engaged in sex work for very low amounts. Genderqueer sex workers in Karachi competed with both male and female sex workers as well as migrant/seasonal prostitutes who were known to charge lower rates.

### *Sex Work and Violence*

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<sup>78</sup> Khwaja sira sex workers relied on visual cues to determine a new customer’s class background and quoted an appropriate amount accordingly; in street-based work, the client’s attire, car and pickup location indicated how much he could afford, while in phone-based dealings, his manner of speaking and use of language (i.e., Urdu, English or some other language) were indicators of purchasing power.

Sex work was both stigmatized and highly dangerous work since it was often accompanied by physical abuse and brutal gang rapes. Khwaja sira rape victims tended to be apathetic to the brutality meted out on them. For instance, I was chatting with a small group of khwaja siras at Payal's house one day when Hasi giggled and said that she was once raped by four men. In response, Meera boasted being dragged into a car and taken to an unknown location where she was forced to have sex with a group of eleven men. Oddly, Meera took pleasure in describing herself as the object of desire and the chosen victim of a bunch of men. Incidents of sexual violence were treated matter-of-factly, and they gave the victims bragging rights over their exploitation. Their flippancy towards such incidents of brutality either served to mask their trauma or indicates their belief that sex workers deserved mistreatment due to their involvement in vice.

### *The Games of Sex Work*

Known as *aḍībāz* in Farsi, some khwaja sira sex workers were pickpockets and extortionists who robbed clients while performing sexual services. One day, Simmy, an *aḍībāz* sex worker, proudly described the games she played with her customers. I learned that she and her guru, Ruby, stood around busy intersections of affluent neighborhoods at dusk each day. Dressed in *niqāb*<sup>79</sup>, they were mistaken for women by onlookers and potential clients. When a car pulled up, Simmy took the front seat next to the driver and Ruby sat in the back. Once inside, the duo would begin dealing with the driver while scanning the vehicle for valuables (e.g., cellphone, wallet). After settling on a sexual service (generally some form of oral sex), they took the money upfront and carefully observed where the client stowed the wallet. The customer either continued driving or

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<sup>79</sup> A headscarf that covers the entire face except the eyes.

pulled over in a dark empty plot where Simmy sexually serviced him. While pleasuring the client, her wandering hands would furtively find the wallet, which she quietly handed over to her guru. Ruby would empty its contents and hand the wallet back to Simmy who put it back in its place. The client was typically too distracted driving the car or being sexually aroused to notice this exchange. Typically after discharging, clients were too rushed to get rid of the prostitutes from their car that they failed to notice the missing belongings until it was too late. Simmy and Ruby would ask to be dropped off at a busy intersection where they disappear into the crowd. The highest amount they had made by robbing a single client was Rs. 50,000. “I’ve even gotten expensive mobiles,” said Simmy. “The other day I brought home an iPhone. I’ve also brought back laptops from people’s cars.”

Sometimes, pickpocketing turned into blackmail. Once an unsuspecting driver offered Simmy a ride, unaware that she was a khwaja sira or a sex worker.

I was walking down the street late at night. I was completely covered up in a veil, and this old man with a big beard pulled over his car. He said to me that I shouldn’t be walking alone so late in the night. He offered me a lift, so I got in. When he started driving, I began taking my clothes off. He got really flustered. He’s was like, “What are you doing? What you do want, child? *Betā*, you’re like my daughter. Don’t get naked! Don’t get naked!” I said to him, “I want Rs. 10,000 right here! Right now!” He quickly took out whatever money he had. He handed me Rs. 5,000. I saw the money and I just sat there naked. I told him that I was going to start screaming. So he quickly took out another 5,000. I took the money and got out.

Simmy decided to blackmail the man when she realized that he was not interested in sex. In such situations, drivers feared losing respect, and panicked over getting into trouble with law enforcement or being attacked by angry mobs for the attempted rape of a young woman. Yelling, screaming and threatening drivers with rape allegations were enough for Simmy to get her victims to comply with her demands. Simmy laughed wickedly as she recounting her skillful manipulation of these men: “When you notice that a man is scared, then doing this work is way

more fun.” These sex workers played with the world through creative methods of theft. These acts of trickery were among the techniques that they had developed in response to being forced into an “unrespectable” profession.

Simmy’s biography partly explains why she felt little remorse for her actions. At the age of seventeen, she was a victim of brutal violence at the hands of a gang of miscreants who raped her and left her for dead. “They cut my hair and poured alcohol over me. Beat me up really badly,” said Simmy as she showed me a set of deep scars on her back. “Initially, the doctors said that I may never be able to walk again.” Simmy’s mother sold her jewelry to cover the cost of her treatment. Indebted to her mother, Simmy vowed to make a lot of money to support her family.

### Seasonal and Miscellaneous Work

In addition to their routine livelihood activities, khwaja siras earned through seasonal work, such as begging, dancing and sex work at the shrines of Sufi saints during their annual death anniversary festivals (‘*urs*), dancing in the well/globe of death (*maut kā kunvān/golā*)<sup>80</sup> at traveling circuses, begging during the festivals of *Eīd*, and collecting and selling wheat during the annual wheat harvest<sup>81</sup>. Birthday parties were another source of income for khwaja siras. Through these celebrations, the hosts made money in the form of cash contributions from khwaja sira guests (*morā*) and through the practice of dropping cash on khwaja sira dancers

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<sup>80</sup> A wooden trellised well/globe in which stuntmen rode cars and motorcycles. Khwaja siras danced at the bottom of the structure, and risked death in the event the vehicles fell over them.

<sup>81</sup> Each year during the wheat harvest, many khwaja siras from Karachi went to live in agricultural areas in rural Sindh and Punjab for a couple of months. They earned by serving as intermediaries between farmers/landlords and the marketplace. During the harvest, they went to the homes of farmers/landlords to collect wheat as a form of charity, and then sold it to market vendors. In 2011, khwaja siras made close to Rs. 100,000 (approx. \$1,143) on average during each month of the harvest.



(tamāshbenī)<sup>82</sup>. Some khwaja siras ran part-time tailoring businesses from home and offered services to their khwaja sira contacts and to the women in their neighborhoods. Other kinds of work for which they were generally known included common housekeeping chores, such as cooking and cleaning.<sup>83</sup>

Those who wished to be involved in “respectable” work, or at least wanted to maintain the illusion of propriety, took up jobs as cooks and peons in the service and corporate sectors. Informants reported working in restaurants, factories, mills, as rickshaw drivers, and hairdressers. They temporarily covered their khwaja sira identities and adopted as masculine a persona as they could for such work. However, most khwaja siras were unable to retain such jobs due to routine harassments from co-workers.

*Nadia:* One day I was begging on the streets and a man asked me if I would change how I dress if someone gave me a proper job. I said yes and he hired me at his office. I worked there for three months. He would pay me Rs. 3000 and my job was to clean, get tea, and do other small tasks. I would dress in a pant-shirt for work. My boss was really nice but the other employees there did not like me. Even though I dressed up in men’s clothes, I was very feminine, and I made the other employees uncomfortable. They would say that I’m the boss’s second wife. And whenever one of his friends would visit, they’d make fun of him for hiring me... That used to make me feel really bad, so I left the job. You see, we often find ourselves at a loss because of our way of walking and talking. We can’t change it. But people laugh at us because of it.

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<sup>82</sup> This event was not held on the actual day of a khwaja sira’s birth even though they were called birthday parties and involved cake-cutting. For these elaborate parties, the hosts distributed invitation cards, reserved wedding halls, hired videographers and DJs, and wore specially tailored outfits. The guests included both khwaja siras and their admirers. The organizers profited from these parties because cash contributions received from guests were typically several times the cost of hosting the event. Birthday parties were mostly held on a need basis. The money that a khwaja sira received was considered a form of loan that she eventually had to pay back. In 2011, khwaja sira consultants made between Rs. 60,000-130,000 (approx. \$686-1,486) per party.

<sup>83</sup> In the past, people hired khwaja siras as domestic employees in their homes. The practice was largely defunct, partly due to the unwillingness of khwaja siras to settle for low wages when their earnings could be significantly higher through begging, dancing and sex work.

*Mahnoor:* I used to work at a garment factory, but murats can't work in places like that. People would tease me and touch me and say all kinds of things. A lot of people there wanted to do things with me.

*Sheeri:* I used to teach English and Mathematics, but I left teaching because students did not treat me with respect. They would call me hijra and whatnot. It was torture.

*Sameera:* I used to work as an accountant at a multinational company. Once, his colleague told him, "What kind of creature have you kept in your office?" In response, my boss said, "He does the work of so three people, so I'm not at a loss by having him." After that, I got a job at a joint venture company... But I reflected badly on the company, and my employer had to lay me off against his will due to pressure from his clients.

No matter how much they tried, gender ambiguous were unable to fully conceal their femininity.

In the workplace, slippages during performances of masculinity tended to result in harassment.

The testimonies of those who tried their hand at "decent" jobs before resorting to khwaja sira work are rife with episodes of sexual violence, emotional abuse and humiliation.

### Government Jobs

Among the rulings passed in their favor, the Supreme Court announced a 2% job quota and ordered the government to create employment opportunities for khwaja siras. Several government departments followed the Court's ruling by offering them employment. The National Database and Registration Authority (NADRA), the department responsible for issuing national identity cards to khwaja siras, appointed a khwaja sira for a desk job at one of its branches. In addition, CBC and CBF, the governing bodies of two distinct municipal towns in Karachi hired khwaja siras as tax recovery officers. In 2011, the two civic bodies combined had hired around twenty khwaja siras. Their job entailed going from door to door to distribute outstanding tax notices and collecting unpaid dues. The khwaja sira employees at CBC and CBF employed hijra begging techniques, which involved creating a spectacle and shaming home and business owners into paying their dues. In 2011, khwaja siras broke the recovery record by

surpassing their periodic quotas. Critics argued that employing gender ambiguous people to exploit their conventional approach to begging reproduced their inferior status rather than enabling them to become “respectable” constituents of society. Alternatively, khwaja sira consultants were proud to be government employees and did not view their cultural practices as markers of inferiority.

In early 2014, the Government of Sindh offered several positions to khwaja siras in various departments as social workers and data entry operators. This was part of an extended plan to hire more gender ambiguous people as public servants and loan recovery officers for private banks. The provision of jobs was part of an effort to “mainstream” khwaja siras, and to steer them away from “indecent” and “immoral” work. By this logic, the state’s attempts were only partially successful since many khwaja siras supplemented their government salaries with earnings through begging and sex work. In Chapters 7 and 9, I further assess the factors that impeded the government’s policies aimed at uplifting khwaja siras.

### NGO Work

Between 2011-12, the number of khwaja siras employed in sexual health NGOs in Pakistan increased significantly partly due to the shift in interest among international donor agencies to fund community-based organizations (CBOs) that required a greater involvement of “at risk” populations, such as khwaja sira, in HIV/AIDS intervention programs. An NGO by the name of “Male Health Society” (MHS) established several CBOs in different parts of the country. Backed by a handsome multi-year grant from a foreign donor, the CBOs linked to MHS hired gender ambiguous people and offered them generous salaries. In 2012, the senior most khwaja sira

employees at these organizations made close to Rs. 80,000 (approx. \$914) a month, inclusive of benefits.

### Competition

Khwaja siras constantly competed with one another in their everyday struggle to earn a living. Their marginalization from mainstream jobs resulted in the scarcity of work within the field, which in turn led to fierce competition among khwaja siras and other sexual minorities. Internal competition often manifested in the form of ethnic conflicts between khwaja siras. These tensions mirrored the larger faultlines that “perpetually undercut belongingness” (Khan 2010, 8) in Pakistan, especially in the ethnically diverse and conflict-ridden city of Karachi. For instance, Payal’s student, Naima, constantly found herself caught in brawls with khwaja siras from different ethnic backgrounds.

The Sindhi khwaja siras here say that we are everything. “Why did you people come from Punjab?” They come and fight with us, so we don’t even meet with them. Hindustanis say that Karachi is theirs. I say, “Okay sister, it is yours. I don’t have the right to earn here. I will sit in my house and not meet with you.”

Naima was regularly made to feel like an outsider even though she was a long-time resident of Karachi. Although she was inducted into a Sindhi household, her Sindhi-speaking family members constantly reminded her of her ethnic difference. Sindhi khwaja siras believed that they had a greater earning right over Karachi than migrants from elsewhere. Payal’s family consisted of khwaja sira migrants from different parts of the country, and many of the fights that took place between them were either produced or aggravated by ethnic differences. Faced with increasing

competition, the Karachi-natives asserted their right over the familial earning area and treated their migrant kin as unwelcomed occupiers<sup>84</sup>.

In addition to internal competition, khwaja siras competed against a number of other types of sex workers. Regardless of their involvement in sex work, khwaja sira prostitutes viewed gay identifying individuals as competition. A growing number of educated gay youth from lower middle-class backgrounds engaged in paid sex either on a full-time or need basis<sup>85</sup>. Moreover, khwaja siras considered ordinary *gay boys* as competition because they provided free

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<sup>84</sup> One day, I witnessed a ferocious brawl at Payal's guru-bhāi's house. The two opposing groups included Payal and her students, Nadia and Moti, on one side, and her guru-bhāi, Laali, and her disciples, Naeem and Chamak, on the other. Payal and Laali's students shared an earning area since they belonged to the same extended family. Naeem claimed that Nadia had been telling the residents of the neighborhood that she had exclusive begging privileges over one of the subdivisions in the area, a claim that Nadia denied. Instead, Nadia insisted that she had advised the neighbors that if Pinky, a khwaja sira thief who belonged to another earning area, came to their house asking for money, they should bar her from entering their house. Pinky belonged to another khwaja sira family but was a longtime friend of Naeem's. Apparently, when Naeem took Pinky for begging one day, she stole an item from one of the houses in the area. In reference to this incident, Nadia stated that gender ambiguous people from other neighborhoods were ruining their family's reputation within the locality.

The situation aggravated when Naeem declared, "We are from here-- all of you are outsiders!" Naeem insinuated that she and her guru-bhāis had more rights over the earning area because they were born and raised in Karachi (*desī*), while Payal's students, Nadia and Moti, who had migrated from Punjab, were non-natives (*pardesī*). On hearing this, Moti, who had been sitting quietly, suddenly jumped to her feet and began verbally abusing and clapping wildly in Naeem's face. Chamak and a few others came to Naeem's rescue in what turned into a collective verbal assault. Soon after, the neighbors started banging on the door of the house, demanding the khwaja siras to put an end to the feud. Payal and Laali joined the dispute in an attempt to put it to rest, but their overbearing voices made the altercation louder instead of silencing the participants. Fearing that the fight would become violent, I stepped away from the group and stood at a safe observable distance. The argument continued unrelentingly for sometime, but fortunately it ended right before the clan came to blows. The neighborhood barber entered the house and separated the parties into two separate rooms, which finally helped to calm everyone down. Once peace was restored, Payal made her and Laali's disciples embrace one another.

<sup>85</sup> In addition to gay boys, young heterosexual boys between the ages of 12-18 (*chāvā*) were known to have sex with men for small sums of money. These boys came from poor families, and they charged lower rates compared to both gays and khwaja siras. Male masseurs (*mālīshīah*), who were also typically heterosexual, were known for their involvement in sex work. These men were mostly seen at nighttime around busy intersections and traffic circles carrying bottles of oil.

sexual access to some male clients<sup>86</sup>. Gender ambiguous people disparaged gay boys for appropriating a feminine appearance in order to attract men. Below, Noman, a self-identified gay man, describes the benefit of makeup as a visual marker of queerness.

My friends and I wear light makeup. The benefit of having a feminine touch is that boys get attracted to you really quickly. No one is able to figure out that I'm gay if I dress normally. Typically, boys see me when I wear makeup and they start talking to me and one thing leads to another.

Others used the Internet to interact with potential clients. In order to access a broader clientele, some gay sex workers experimented with cross-dressing and created Internet profiles of their feminine personas. Khwaja siras despised gays for impinging on their livelihood, especially since they were educated and had access to mainstream job opportunities.

### Earning/Spending Patterns

Khwaja siras were culturally marginalized and limited to earning a living through socially unacceptable work. However, they were not impoverished in terms of gross income. The khwaja sira residents of Karachi were earning between Rs. 20,000-30,000 (approx. \$ 229-343) per month on average, which was well above the poverty line in 2011. Earnings varied depending on

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<sup>86</sup> In Pakistan's male dominated society, women were less present compared to men in the public sphere. Strict moral codes and limitations on mobility restricted men from accessing women. These constraints fueled the sex industry in Pakistan, where gender ambiguous people, gay boys, heterosexual boys, male masseurs and female sex workers provided sexual relief to hordes of single and married men. With sexual release being the primary objective for many, it was not surprising that an overlap had developed in the clientele of this diverse group of sex workers. Consequently, those involved in the industry tended to view one another as competitors vying for a share of the client pool. In some situations, however, competitors turned into allies. This was certainly the case for some khwaja siras and female sex workers who had found ways to collaborate for mutual benefit. For instance, Ghazal informed me about a vast inter-city network of sex workers through which she frequently made money by serving as an intermediary between women sex workers and clients. This sex worker network extended beyond Pakistan to places like Dubai where women and khwaja siras worked seasonally as bar dancers and escorts.

a khwaja sira's beauty, her location, source of livelihood, and the number of hours worked each day.

However, the high incomes of khwaja siras were offset by their high monthly expenses. This was because most supported two households, which, in addition to personal living expenses, included sending remittances to their natal kin. Moreover, khwaja siras spent a significant portion of their incomes on personal upkeep, which was crucial to those who earned through dancing and sex work. In addition to spending on clothes, wigs, makeup and jewelry, they invested in enhancing their physical appearance through medical procedures (e.g., breast implants, physical emasculation, laser hair removal, hormone therapy) as well as less invasive methods (e.g., threading, waxing, bleaching and skin lightening). Moreover, khwaja siras had to spend on both men's and women's products given their need to maintain two genders.

Our expenses are twice as much as common people. For instance, we use razors and *Fair and Lovely* (skin lightening cream). Women only have to spend money on things that women need, but *shemales* have to spend on things that both men and women need. We have to get both men's and women's outfits made because we need men's clothes when we visit our families.

Importantly, their expenses would have been lower had the social stigma surrounding khwaja siras not existed. Finally, a considerable amount of money was squandered on food, alcohol, marijuana, cigarettes, and on cash contributions made at cultural events. These earning and spending patterns are astonishing in light of the stereotype of khwaja siras as impoverished people.

### **Khwaja Sira Self-Representation**

#### Deceiving the Anthropologist

Stigma, oppression and marginalization necessitated khwaja siras to engage in secrecy and a deception in interactions with outsiders. During the first couple of months of fieldwork, the games of secrecy and deception that khwaja siras played with me worked quite well. Often my communication with them left me feeling confused, frustrated and unclear about many aspects of their lives. As a pawn in this web of deceit, I gradually pieced together the puzzle that my informants had created for me. Here, I describe my firsthand experiences with khwaja sira obfuscation and deception.

Foremost was the secrecy surrounding corporeality. Colloquially, many interlocutors employed the term “khwaja sira” for gender ambiguous people even though formally many understood it to mean an intersexual person. Goffman suggests that stigmatized persons use various strategies to fashion a virtual identity that is distinct from their actual social identity (1963, 41). Similarly, the true identity of khwaja siras as *akvās* and *nirbāns* was different from their virtual public identity as intersexuals. During initial interviews, my casual use of the term khwaja sira produced some unexpected results. When I told prospective respondents that I was studying khwaja siras, some of them thought that I was looking to interview people with congenital irregularities and, therefore, claimed to be intersexual. They engaged in a form of mimesis by feeding me information that they thought I was seeking, particularly since they were afraid of revealing their *akvā* and *nirbān* statuses. In order to circumvent the politics of the word, Nadia and I decided to avoid using the term khwaja sira in subsequent recruitment efforts.

However, the performances of deception persisted during interviews. One day, I interviewed Malka as she lay comfortably on her bed. Nadia sat beside me smoking a cigarette as I questioned Malka about her gender/sexual identity. Nadia and Malka were *guru-bhāīs*, but I barely knew Malka and had only briefly met her once prior to the interview.



**Faris:** If I ask you who you are, what would you tell me?

**Malka:** I am a khwaja sira.

**Faris:** What is a khwaja sira?

**Malka:** A khwaja sira is someone who is by birth (*paidāishī*).

**Faris:** What do you mean by “by birth”?

**Malka:** Those who are born with both boy and girl parts.

**Faris:** I see. What about other types of khwaja siras?

**Malka:** What types? There are no other types.

**Faris:** What about those who are akvā and nirbān?

Malka was momentarily stunned by my knowledge of khwaja sira somatic categories and use of Farsi terms for non-emasculated and emasculated people.

**Malka:** Oh, those types. Yeah, but I’m not like them. I’ve always been like this.

**Faris:** But I thought most khwaja siras are either akvā or nirbān.

**Malka:** Yes, but I’m not like that. I’m by birth.

Malka and I continued to dance around the topic of identity and corporeality until I realized that she was not going to give up the charade. I decided to stop probing and moved onto the next question. I had grown familiar with these informant dance routines by the time this interview took place. Simmel argues that people’s ability to be truthful or not depends on their level of knowledge of one another (Lieberman 1977, 66). In social interactions, it is easier to deceive others in the absence of reciprocal knowledge, and the act of deceiving depends upon on the deceived’s lack of information (Lieberman 1977, 67). Likewise, the relationships between khwaja siras and ordinary people were characterized by the latter’s limited and distorted knowledge of the former. These interactions were also influenced by khwaja sira’s perceptions of and experiences with the social stigma attached to gender/sexual variance. In such situations, gender ambiguous people engaged in a deceptive game of self-representation in which they asserted the religiously sanctioned intersexual identity. Similarly, interviewing was like playing a game of bluff, where the players, in this case the interviewer and interviewee, tried reading the other for signs of knowledge and deception, while carefully calculating their next move.

Even though I doubted Malka's claim about her being intersexual, her resolute response left me feeling uncertain. It was not until after the interview that Nadia cleared my uncertainty. "So is she really by birth?" I asked Nadia as we left Malka's house. "Of course not!" said responded. "She's such a liar! She has such a big penis." While interacting with outsiders, informants reinforced the dominant meaning of khwaja sira in order to protect themselves from discrimination. However, unlike Malka, most interlocutors reluctantly dropped the ruse when I demonstrated my insider knowledge about gender ambiguous people. Their façade of deception collapsed in the presence of reciprocal knowledge.

Khwaja sira games of secrecy and deception were grounded in the partial and erroneous knowledge—comprised primarily of myths and stereotypes—that the general public had of them. Khwaja siras benefitted from the awareness that non-khwaja siras people knew little about them, which helped to facilitate their deceptive acts of survival. They either blatantly misrepresented themselves as intersexuals or evaded questions pertaining to corporeality.

**Faris:** There are different types of khwaja siras. What type are you?

**Noor:** A tree has one root, but it has branches that go in different directions. Essentially all khwaja siras are the same. There are some who are beautiful so they think they are women, and they look down upon those who are less beautiful than them. They think that they are better than others.

**Faris:** I have heard that nirbāns look down upon akvās.

**Noor:** Yes, you are right, but even nirbāns stem from akvās. Akvās are the root.

Noor avoided discussing the genital constitution of gender ambiguous people, or what Lieberman refers to as "deception by omission" (1977, 78) and skirted the topic of emasculation. Further, she digressed by commenting on the contentions between khwaja siras, which she misleadingly attributed to differences in gender ambiguous people's physical beauty. It was not until I demonstrated my insider knowledge of Farsi terms related to emasculation that Noor was more forthcoming with me. My deliberate use of the words akvā and nirbān made her

obfuscation attempts futile, and she immediately dropped the tree analogy for a literal explanation of corporeal taxonomies. However, even then, Noor refrained from revealing her own somatic status.

Among the secrets that khwaja siras kept from the general public were their sexual relationships with men. People's involvement in illegitimate sexual behavior casts doubt on their moral character. Hence, informants reinforced the myth that khwaja siras were either asexual ascetics or physically incapable of engaging in sexual behavior. In light of the taboos associated with sex, it was prudent of khwaja siras to be discreet about their love and sex lives.

Gender ambiguous people also concealed their marital status in order to perpetuate the stereotype of intersexuality, childlessness and asceticism associated with khwaja siras. When questioned about marriage, Shani laughed and said, "See, khwaja siras cannot get married." Shani's use of the word "cannot" was meant to suggest that gender ambiguous people were incapable of marriage and reproduction. Similarly, Guppo laughed nervously when I asked her if she was married. "We don't get married," she said. When I insisted that I knew married khwaja siras, she said, "No, no. There's no such thing." However, about a month after the interview, Guppo trusted me enough to confide that she was married with three children.

Further, informants were dishonest about their involvement in sex work. When I first met her, Kajal gave me the impression that she had never engaged in prostitution. It was not until my sixth month into fieldwork that she finally admitted being a sex worker. By then, she felt comfortable entertaining clients in a private room in her house during my visits to her *ḍerā*. On one such occasion, Kajal excused herself when a client arrived, and upon her return, offered vivid details about her experience with him. Her warming up to me was a stark contrast from her initial self-representation as a "respectable" khwaja sira. Likewise, most informants initially hid

their involvement in sex work and many denounced it as a reprehensible act. However, over time they confided in me, especially upon realizing that I was not one to pass moral judgment based on sexual behavior. Khwaja siras who barely knew me hid the same aspects of their lives that they covered from other “worldly” people.

Secrecy was often maintained through the use of Farsi. Over tea one afternoon, Maina taught me key Farsi terms for my research. When her guru-bhāī, Nighat, overheard our conversation from across the room, she quickly approached Maina and uttered in Farsi, “Be quiet!” (*Kaṛe karājā*). With a subtle glare, she signaled Maina to quit teaching me their secret code. By then, I had already picked up enough Farsi to understand the exchange between the two. This was not the first time I had witnessed a khwaja sira expressing concern over an outsider learning Farsi. I assured Nighat that Maina had not taught me anything that I did not already know. Farsi enabled khwaja siras to secure communication in the presence of third parties they did not trust. It was a cryptographic tool that allowed them to control information and to maintain privacy about the clandestine aspects of their lives.

### Significance of Secrecy and Deception

The motivations behind such performances of deception were sundry. One of the primary reasons was the fear of negatively impacting the respectability of one’s immediate kin (i.e., parents, siblings, wives, children) and being persecuted by extended family. As one khwaja sira told me, “Anything can happen. God forbid my relatives see the interview and I get into trouble, so it is better to avoid giving interviews altogether.” The suspicion of outsiders was not completely unfounded since the carelessness of media outlets had previously gotten khwaja siras into trouble. I learned that before my arrival in the field, a local television channel covered a

story on khwaja siras, and upon the participant's request, promised to blur their faces. However, the informants were exposed when the show finally aired, and as a result, many were persecuted by their extended families.

Moreover, secrecy and deception were essential since most key aspects of the khwaja sira lifestyle were either illegal or religiously and socially objectionable. For instance, sex work and anal sex were unlawful and believed to be sinful and disrespectful. Begging was frowned upon and tolerable only in situations of dire financial need, while dancing was considered to be a dishonorable profession. Those who possessed functioning male genitals were viewed as reproductively capable men who posed as khwaja sira, while the feminine soul was a culturally unrecognized condition. Instead of challenging social norms, gender ambiguous people obfuscated aspects of their sexuality, identity, corporeality and livelihood, and engaged in the games of deceit with the general public in order to maintain individual and communal security and respectability, and to gain personal advantage over their opponents, who sometimes included other khwaja siras.

When I met her in March 2013, Naima complained about the negative effects of the public attention that khwaja siras had received since the 2009 Supreme Court directives. "In the past, people did not know or care about us, but now they know everything." Naima blamed media outlets and zennanas for disclosing the secrets of khwaja siras to the public, thereby preventing gender ambiguous people from peacefully earning a living under the guise of respectability. "Now so many people know that we are not by birth, that we have children, and that we get operated," she lamented. Naima alluded to the public's growing awareness about khwaja siras, or what Lieberman refers to as "closed and suspicious awareness" (Lieberman 1977, 68). This meant that mainstream society was either oblivious to the fact that gender

ambiguous people lied to them or they harbored suspicions that they were being deceived. Suspicious awareness produced a state of ambiguity about khwaja sira corporeality, sexuality and livelihood. This emerging situation highlights the enduring need for concealment and deception among khwaja siras.

## **Conclusion**

Cultural, structural and direct violence from natal kin, partners, neighbors, employers, patrons, and from other khwaja siras compelled gender ambiguous people to engage in the games of secrecy and deception with their oppressors. They had to constantly negotiate respectability because their culture and livelihood were entrenched in socially and religiously reprehensible practices. In everyday life, khwaja siras exercised deceptive agency to escape persecution. Moreover, they portrayed themselves as moral and responsible through constant self-policing in public spaces, by producing an aura of respectability through participation in socially and religiously commendable acts, and by successfully managing their dual roles as khwaja siras (in the field) and as men (in their familial networks). They tried to pass as men during visits to their familial homes, but in their lives as khwaja siras, they tried to pass as intersexual and asexual ascetics while covering involvement in socially offensive behavior. Indeed, covering and misleading was much easier than confronting social norms and risking further marginalization and disempowerment. This chapter concludes Part 2 and its focus on the culture and subjectivity of khwaja siras. Part 3 reveals that the issues encountered by ordinary khwaja siras, such as stigma, repression, exclusion, and the complications emanating from varied understandings of their identity, were replicated in the domain of activism. It sheds light on how khwaja sira

activists dealt with these problems and the kinds deceptive techniques they deployed to counter their subjugation.

**PART THREE:**  
**Activism**



## **Chapter 6:** **Internal Identity Politics: Activism, Stigma and Social Differentiation**

Although khwaja siras had an ancient system of social organization, their organizing for rights and social justice was in its infancy at the time of this research. This chapter explores many of the challenges faced by the khwaja sira movement from within. The habitus or the dispositions and internalized structures embedded within individual consciousness (Bourdieu 2008, 82-3) impact social movements on the microcosmic level (Salman and Assies 2007, 235). The everyday life of khwaja sira activists and their organizations represented these smaller constellations where generative behavior emerged. When khwaja siras entered activist spaces, they brought with them the burdens of the past. In other words, they were influenced by the “deeply buried structure that shape[ed]...[their] dispositions to act in ways that they wind[ed] up accepting the dominance of... ‘the system,’ without being made to do so” (Ortner 2006, 5). As subjects of their time and place, khwaja sira activists were swayed by unconscious constraints since they and their organizations were not removed from the larger society. Consequently, normative constructions of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, morality and so on were reproduced in khwaja sira activism. However, human beings also have the ability to make choices that allow them to maneuver around their limitations (Barnard 2000, 143). Likewise, khwaja sira leaders found ways to make the structure enabling for themselves.

This chapter lays bare the challenges posed by the activist’s habitus, which reproduced in institutionalized contexts many of the same problems that plagued khwaja sira communities (discussed in Chapter 4). The lack of unity within the khwaja sira cultural system was replicated in the realm of activism. I argue that the harmful effects of social stigma trickled into khwaja sira organizations, prompting activists to discriminate against one another on the basis of normative

culture and khwaja sira ideals. And yet, the imbrications between and the mutual interests of distinct queer groups occasionally enabled collaborations across difference.

## **Queer and Khwaja Sira Organizing in Pakistan**

### Encounters With the State

I begin with a brief introduction to the history of queer organizing in Pakistan, highlighting the role of sexual health NGOs in paving the way for khwaja sira organizations. Queer encounters with the Pakistani state include a ban that was imposed on hijra activities in the early 1960s. According to an Urdu daily, the state's action was a measure to weed out fake hijras, for which it prescribed as punishment shaving the heads of those impersonating hijras (Daily Express, 2007). However, the prohibition was lifted after khwaja siras staged a sit-in in front of President Ayub Khan's residence where they complained to Khan's "mother about her son's decision... reminding her that they had sung a *lorī* (a lullaby for infants) for Ayub when he was born" (Naqvi and Mujtaba 1997, 266). The next notable queer confrontation with the state occurred during the 1990 elections when a zennana was nominated by the people of Abbottabad to run for public office (Naqvi and Mujtaba 1997, 267). The candidate, Mohammad Aslam, a singer/dancer and waiter by profession, did not win a seat but certainly paved the way for greater khwaja sira involvement in politics (Pamment 2010, 36). In 1997, Almas Bobby, a Rawalpindi based khwaja sira attempted to contest a seat in the national assembly but the government rejected her application (Pamment 2010, 36)<sup>87</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Hijras in India have also demonstrated interest in local and national politics by running for public office. In their campaigns, these hijras have represented themselves as being above the corruption and immorality typical of Indian politics (Reddy 2005, 223).

Since the mid-2000s, several factors have played a role in facilitating queer organizing in Pakistan. First, the economic liberalization of the early 1990s introduced changes in trade policies, strengthened the private sector (Chaudhry 1995, 188), and increased the transnational traffic of people and ideas. Second, the sexual health and advocacy programs that were set up to contain HIV/AIDS created opportunities for sexual minorities to organize and to learn about rights activism. Third, the Supreme Court's ruling in favor of khwaja siras not only invigorated khwaja sira activism but also encouraged other queer groups in the country. In 2013, seven khwaja sira leaders from across Pakistan contested in the Pakistani General and Assembly Elections as independent candidates. Although none of them were triumphant, their participation was a democratic milestone for the country.

### LGBT Organizing

Queer organizing began in small measure in Pakistan in the mid-2000s, however, to date, the country does not have a visible LGBT movement per se. While the majority of this activism was centered on khwaja sira groups publically fighting for citizenship rights, other sexual minorities also began to organize surreptitiously. In light of legal, religious and cultural restrictions, it is hardly surprising that much of this organizing transpired underground. Although there were several queer activist organizations in Pakistan at the time of this research, they kept a very low profile, and the few that were registered with the government managed to do so under the guise of minority rights and youth development. Most were involved in community support and development rather than public advocacy and demands for rights. A few had managed to acquire foreign donor funding for small research and development projects involving sexual minorities.

In 2013, at least two queer organizations that I know of had office spaces, but the vast majority were online entities, functioning as secret Facebook groups, websites and blogs<sup>88</sup>. Online organizing played a key role in connecting local and diasporic queers and in fostering a sense of community. It was also instrumental in disseminating information and facilitating dialogue around issues pertaining to sexuality and rights.

Rather than adopting an aggressive top-down approach to activism, most of these organizations opted for a measured grassroots strategy that suited the Pakistani context. In contrast, khwaja siras were visible in the public sphere, where they openly engaged in advocacy and demanded rights. Unlike gays and lesbians, khwaja siras were culturally tolerated, but they were not free from many of the restrictions and dangers that applied to other sexual/gender minorities.

### Khwaja Sira Development and Activism

Moments of khwaja sira mobilizing in the history of Pakistan have been few and far between. However, there was a marked shift in the intensity of their activism in the first decade of the twenty-first century owing partly to legal reform and to HIV/AIDS intervention. The present turn to khwaja sira organizing started roughly around 2004 when community leaders began to organize and publically challenge the status quo. What further propelled their activism was the 2009 Supreme Court decision to grant rights to khwaja siras. After decades without legal

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<sup>88</sup> The administrators of queer websites and blogs had to be careful about the kind of material they posted on their online forums in order to avoid getting banned by the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA). At the time of this study, certain online content was inaccessible to Internet users in Pakistan, including pornography, gay dating and hookups websites, and websites containing words deemed offensive by PEMRA. Moreover, amid fears of government surveillance, many queer groups on Facebook had strict admission and membership policies.

recognition and protection, the Pakistani state collaborated with NGOs and activists in an effort to empower khwaja siras. As a result of the Court's decision, community leaders gained confidence, started forming organizations, launching protests against harassment, and collaborating with media outlets to highlight rights violations. However, other than empowering activist leaders and diminishing police brutality, improvement in their legal status did little to positively impact the everyday lives of ordinary khwaja siras. This, in turn, explains the continued involvement of khwaja sira rights groups and NGOs in the social development of this minority population.

Pakistan is home to a host of NGOs that are engaged in the surveillance and control of HIV/AIDS. Many of these organizations work on the sexual health of vulnerable males who have sex with males (MSM), a broad framework that oftentimes includes khwaja siras. Along with disease prevention and control, a few NGOs focus on issues of rights and on the social development of khwaja siras, but up until 2013 there had been little overall progress in this area.

There is a strong yet complex link between health and activism in that issues of public health invite social reform when human life is at stake (Pigg and Adams 2005). Consequently, political organizing often occurs in and through public health domains. This has certainly been the case for HIV/AIDS intervention in India and now increasingly in Pakistan, where programs to control the spread of the virus have mushroomed across the country in the last decade or so.<sup>89</sup> Sexual health organizations employed khwaja siras and created new venues for them to convene.

Though project funds are meant primarily for HIV intervention, they are also used for the capacity building of smaller organizations that provide services to sexual minorities. Capacity

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<sup>89</sup> HIV/AIDS programs have blossomed partly due to the Pakistani government's commitment to curb the spread of the disease in the country, to which end it has been providing free treatment (i.e., medication, monthly testing and counseling) to HIV positive patients since 2005.

building refers to the process whereby individuals and organizations create and improve a set of desired qualities that can be drawn upon to perform and achieve certain objectives (Potter and Brough 2004, 337). It can include activities, such as the provision of material and financial support, educational training and skill enhancement, leadership development, alliance formation, fundraising, research and assessment, media advocacy, strategic planning, and so on. The educational training of these NGOs also covers topics related to gender, sexuality, and human rights along with issues of sexual and reproductive health. NGOs regularly recruit indigenous minorities and provide them educational training on these topics in order to build their capacities and to transform them into rights-conscious activists.

Up until early 2013, NGOs in Pakistan had done little to build the capacities of khwaja siras. One of the few exceptions was Male Health Society (MHS), a relatively new NGO that focused on the sexual health of MSM and “transgender” people. In addition to educating vulnerable groups about their right of access to sexual health, MHS initiated a literacy project for khwaja siras in mid-2013. This program aimed to teach English, Urdu, and basic arithmetic to gender ambiguous people. Nonetheless, such development activities were rare, and most NGOs had made halfhearted attempts that had little impact on the lives of khwaja siras. Instead of capacity building, many focused on developing close ties with khwaja sira communities through the provision of services and resources. In addition to condom distribution and clinical services, some opened their premises for khwaja siras to hold cultural events. A few NGOs played a role in helping khwaja sira leaders set up organizations of their own by allowing them to run their operations from the NGO’s office<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Among the problems facing the NGO sector in Pakistan was corruption, which indirectly affected khwaja sira activism. Project funds were frequently misappropriated instead of being utilized for their intended purpose. Needless to say, NGO corruption was detrimental to the

In recent years, donor agencies have become increasingly interested in funding community based organizations (CBOs) in developing countries. CBOs are either independently run or are non-profit subsidiaries of large NGOs. Individual CBOs are run by and for specific local or indigenous communities, and are either self-funded or operate on a voluntary basis. Their recent popularity among donors is based on the notion that small local groups are more effective in addressing the needs of target populations than large organizations. Many NGOs in Pakistan, including MHS, caught onto this CBO-centered funding trend. For instance, MHS set up MSM and TG CBOs across the country that focused primarily on sexual health<sup>91</sup>. In 2013, the organization and its CBOs had employed close to 99 individuals, 92 of whom were either gay or gender ambiguous.

NGO-led sexual health programs have played a role in propelling khwaja sira activism in Pakistan. As mentioned earlier, development programs play a key role in transforming their target populations by educating them about sexuality, identity and rights. NGO trainings and employment not only taught khwaja siras about advocacy, but also how to run organizations of their own. By late 2013, I knew of eight organizations that were being run relatively independently by khwaja siras, less than half of which were government-registered. Five of these were in Punjab, one in Kyber Pakhtunkhwa, and four in Sindh. Despite their best efforts, most khwaja sira organizations were handicapped due to lack of education and basic skills, even though some, including GSS, received technical support from larger organizations like MHS.

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social development of khwaja siras. While some activists had become disillusioned with NGO work, others mastered the dishonest practices of these organizations, which resulted in a collective drive to land large grants rather than focusing on the problems facing khwaja siras.

<sup>91</sup> AKS, the Lahore-based khwaja sira organization that I studied, was among the CBOs set up by MHS.

Although khwaja siras learned valuable lessons through their participation in sexual health projects, their activist politics were deeply rooted in their culture and subjectivity.

#### Gender Solidarity Society: A Brief History

Payal, the president of GSS, was an illiterate hijra in her late-forties. Over the course of her career, she had gradually risen in rank within her local hijra community. Not only was she the chief of one of the largest earning areas in Karachi, but she was also the elder of an extensive network of khwaja siras who were filially linked to one another. She started her journey as a social worker in 2006, and around the same time she met Hira, a student of gender and sexuality at a liberal arts college in the United States, and her mother, Aaliya, a veteran activist of the women's movement in Pakistan. Hira wanted to make a documentary on khwaja siras for her senior thesis, and her project connected her with Payal. Payal's outlook changed when she met Hira who inspired her to begin working for her people. In fact, it was Hira who suggested that Payal set up her own organization, and she even coined the name Gender Solidarity Society. When GSS was eventually formed, Aaliya contributed to the online content of the organization's new website. Aaliya also introduced Payal to women activists and took her to various meetings. This gave Payal the opportunity to learn how other activist organizations function. The intervention of this mother-daughter duo was instrumental not only in establishing GSS, but also in shaping Payal into an activist leader.

GSS was the first khwaja sira run organization in Sindh to get registered. It began operating in Karachi in 2009, and it functioned primarily as an advocacy group, which spoke on behalf of khwaja siras. GSS organized and participated in various activist events, such as public protests, press conferences, media advocacy, consultation workshops on the rights of khwaja



siras, and trainings and events related to HIV/AIDS. The organization established alliances with government departments, politicians, celebrities and numerous activist groups and NGOs that worked on issues of sexual health, minority rights, community building and on the empowerment of vulnerable populations<sup>92</sup>. However, GSS had had a tenuous existence since its formation, which, in addition to a host of technical constraints (e.g., lack of sufficient education, skilled membership, funding) was exacerbated by a slew of sociocultural problems that I discuss in this chapter. In the absence of the resources required to keep it afloat, the organization went through several periods of dormancy.

When I met Payal in early 2011, she was running her organization from her residence, a small one room flat located next to a sewage stream in Akther Colony. The office space was restricted to Payal's unfurnished bedroom, which consisted of two metal storage boxes, a bedcover that she was using as a carpet, and a few floor cushions. Payal had temporarily retreated from activist work following a series of unfortunate incidents, including the death of a key member of her organization and the subsequent splintering of the group. Over the course of its tenuous existence, GSS had switched offices several times. Previously, the organization was housed in a sexual health NGO that had assigned GSS office space on its premises. However, Payal lost this space due to disputes with the NGO's staff. Several months into my fieldwork, GSS moved yet again when the organization's members found a proper two bedroom flat along the outskirts of an affluent neighborhood. The space not only served as GSS's office, but also as Payal and Shani's residence. Shani was Payal's daughter and the organization's treasurer.

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<sup>92</sup> I use the term "alliances" loosely to describe certain sets of relationships between GSS and sexual health NGOs, queer organizations, women's rights groups, specific gay social circles, etc. At the time of my research, these groups did not combine to form an intersectional movement that was united by a common political purpose. Hence, I view them as individual relationships between specific groups. For instance, GSS had ties with both women's groups and gay organizations, but these groups did not necessarily have a relationship with one another.

Payal's lack of education and her reliance on others factored into the organization's persisting instability.

In addition to Shani, GSS's core member body included Nyla, the organization's vice president and a former participant in several HIV intervention projects. Shazia, the general secretary, was a twenty-something college graduate who worked as a government tax collector by day and a beautician at an upscale hair saloon in the evenings. Maina, one of GSS's two joint secretaries, was a government tax collector and tailor. Nadia was also a joint secretary and Payal's disciple. Ameer, GSS's communications officer, and the organizations' only non-khwaja sira core member, worked at a sexual health NGO. Within the activist domain, Payal was typically called "Mother Payal" or "Mama," terms of address that I too adopted out of deference for her seniority and status when I began volunteering at GSS. Besides GSS, I cite examples from my two-month long fieldwork in Lahore, where I spent most of my time at a CBO named Association of Khwaja Siras (AKS).

## **GSS and Patriarchy**

### Patriarchy in Khwaja Sira Organizations

The patriarchal leadership of zennana and hijra communities was replicated in khwaja sira activist organizations where it often produced conflict. Many prominent khwaja sira leaders managed to enter public activism as a result of their high status within their social networks. For instance, Payal's position as the chief of a major earning area in Karachi prompted her entry into the activist sphere. Similarly, Noor Vicky, a wealthy khwaja sira and the chief of roughly twenty five hundred gender ambiguous people in Rawalpindi was the obvious representative for her community in the public sphere. These individuals possessed hijraness or indigenous leadership

skills through which they rose in rank both within their districts and in the activist sphere. They were in the unique position to represent khwaja siras because they had a sizable following within their large kin groups.

Khwaja sira activism was not entirely independent of the hijra and zennana kinship systems. Executive positions within activist groups were often designated to the relatives of khwaja sira leaders. For instance, Payal had installed one of her students and daughters in GSS's core committee. Having relatives within one's organization was useful because it ensured a level loyalty and reinforced the authority of activist leaders. This was particularly important given the general environment of mistrust and suspicion within khwaja sira networks. Entering a hijra or zennana family subjected its members to checks and balances, which entailed fines levied against those who violated rules or broke the circle of trust. Hence, a daughter or a disciple was less likely to deceive the organization's head since the consequences of her misconduct would not only affect her professional relationships but also her personal ties with her kin.

The reproduction of the khwaja sira social structure within activist contexts also assisted in mobilizing gender ambiguous people. Activist groups must perform the important task of deploying frames that resonate with target populations in order to recruit and mobilize them for collective action (Snow and Benford 1988, 198). However, khwaja sira leaders were advantaged in this process since their indigenous social setup, with its vast network of intricately connected households and lineages, was prearranged for the quick and easy mobilization of constituents. For instance, Payal, like most other activist leaders, managed to organize protests rather effortlessly by making a few phone calls to select members of her extended family. Being a prominent guru with a large family bolstered her ability to assemble khwaja siras at a moment's

notice. The linkages between gender ambiguous people through their vast kinship networks aided in mobilizing them and served as a resource for their activism.

### Hierarchy and Seniority

As mentioned in earlier chapters, hijraness entailed being respectful of khwaja sira elders. Juniors were expected to show deference to senior family members, to obey their orders, and to avoid undermining their authority. These rules of seniority were carried over into khwaja sira activism where they prevented juniors from engaging in public advocacy. If gender variant youth become activist leaders, they would inevitably undermine the authority of gurus and elders, thereby weakening the traditional power structure within khwaja sira communities. Hence, even though juniors were selected for governance roles within activist groups, they were mostly subordinate to the senior khwaja siras who presided over the daily management of the organizations. As a result, the patriarchal structure of khwaja sira families was replicated within these groups.



**Figure 12.** A group photo of the anthropologist with khwaja sira activists taken after a meeting at an NGO in Karachi.

The importance placed on seniority produced frictions within khwaja sira organizations, particularly in situations where younger and educated activists threatened to destabilize the prevailing leadership hierarchy. A case in point was the contentious relationships between Payal and Farah. Payal recruited Farah and gave her an important post in GSS. At the time, Farah had not been initiated into the guru-celā system and was relatively unfamiliar with the ideals of seniority within khwaja sira culture. Farah's presence in GSS was unsettling for other members of the organization. She spoke out of turn, defied Payal's instructions, and repeatedly undermined her authority. Alternatively, Farah found GSS's power structure to be oppressive.

Payal wants to be superior, and I have no objection to that, especially when we're just hanging out. But when we're working, I think we should all be equal. But they think that I don't have the right to comment on anything. Every person has an opinion and you cannot shut them up. But they believe that she is senior due to her experience...I couldn't stand all the bitchiness and playing guru-celā within the NGO.

Farah's ambition, her distaste for the guru-celā system, and her inability to abide by the principles of seniority eventually led to her expulsion from GSS. She formed her own organization, Murat Collective (MC), after she was cast out of GSS due to her misdemeanor. Her experience highlights the oppressive nature of patriarchal leadership in khwaja sira social and activist networks. Not only did it produce tensions within khwaja sira organizations but it also hindered younger gender variant people from expressing fresh ideas and steering activism into new directions. Educated youth viewed the patriarchal structure of khwaja sira communities as an impediment to the development of gender ambiguous people, and they considered indigenous seniority (barāpān) to be at odds with modernity, independence and progress.

Moreover, the older generation of khwaja siras who resided in historic households (baṛī maṛī) disapproved the involvement of gender ambiguous people in the public sphere. These seniors preferred to keep a low public profile because they feared that participation in

mainstream society would bring undesirable attention to khwaja siras and jeopardize their reputation and security. These differences in opinion between khwaja sira activists and lineage chiefs produced inter-generational conflict that inhibited activist work. Many leaders felt guilty for defying their elders, while some abstained from participating in activism altogether in order to avoid criticism from them.

### **Ethnic Discrimination**

The sociocultural diversity among gender variant people impacted the relationships within khwaja sira organizations. The politics of differentiation within GSS reflected broader issues that had fragmented khwaja sira communities. “There is a lot of grouping within GSS,” said Farah. “And the problems of the community [have] entered the group.” Farah’s observation underscores the numerous social ruptures within activist groups, which emerged due to differences in ethnicity, class, identity, corporeality and occupation, and were exacerbated by issues of inferiority/low self-esteem, superiority/hierarchy, and power relations. I begin with a discussion of the impact of ethnicity on the social relationships within activist networks.

In chapter 5, I described the ethnic conflicts within khwaja sira communities. The ethnic discrimination within guru-celā networks, which reflected broader social fissures within Pakistani society, seeped into activist circles. Although, in her public advocacy, Payal represented khwaja sira social networks as accepting of difference, in her everyday life, she herself tended to favor Sindhi khwaja siras like herself. This also influenced the composition of GSS’s core membership, which consisted of four Sindhis, one Saraiki, and one Punjabi khwaja sira. The Sindhis, which included Payal, Shani, Shazia and Maina, favored one another and frequently colluded against Nadia and Nyla. Nadia was convinced that her fellow team members

did not want Saraikis to progress, which explained their animosity towards her. She was frustrated by their sense of superiority and desire to promote other Sindhi khwaja siras. Nadia's suspicions were not unwarranted since just a few weeks earlier, Maina had personally admitted that she and the other Sindhi members of GSS were not fond of "outsiders" like Nadia because they did not share the same language, beliefs or practices. Like anyone else, gender ambiguous people had an affinity to those with whom they shared linguistic and cultural similarities.

During a consultation workshop jointly organized by GSS and MHS at a hotel in Karachi, a violent argument broke out between Payal and her student, Moti. GSS members, gender ambiguous people from Payal's social circle, and MHS's gay staff attended the event. The squabble started when Payal stated that migrants from Punjab were less likely to register for khwaja sira ID cards because a large majority of them were married to women and had children.

**Moti:** It is not necessary for you to only mention khwaja siras from Punjab...Here we have Punjabi khwaja siras, Saraiki khwaja siras, Pathan khwaja siras, Sindhi khwaja siras...Any one ethnicity should not be made a target.

**Payal:** We are not talking about different ethnicities here. We are here in a meeting!

Suddenly, Payal sprung to her feet and started clapping violently. In response, Moti started shouting back at her guru.

**Moti:** Again and again you talk about Punjab! I'm from Punjab! Won't we feel hurt if you single us out!

When the argument escalated, someone suggested singing in order to diffuse the tension, and immediately a couple of khwaja siras broke into a song. The meeting resumed after a long break, but by then, Moti had stormed out of the hotel along with two of her disciples. Later, Payal attributed Moti's behavior to low self-esteem while the other participants lamented the lack of cohesion among gender ambiguous people. Needless to say, ethnic conflict reproduced social stigma within hijra and zennana networks and was counterproductive to khwaja sira activism.

## **Corporeality and Conflict**

The corporeal differences among khwaja siras produced conflict not only in their everyday lives but also in their activism. In fact, some of the most contentious differences between activist leaders were related to emasculation, which split the khwaja sira movement into two broad groups: those who viewed both akvās/zennanas and nirbāns/hijras as khwaja siras and those who only included the latter in the khwaja sira identity category.

## Zennanas, Hijras and Activism

The public misrepresentation of gender ambiguous people by prominent community leaders produced discord within khwaja sira social and activist networks. In their public advocacy, many activists, such as Noor Vicky, regularly demonized akvā khwaja siras as “normal” men who joined khwaja sira communities for ulterior motives. The fact that these activists were emasculated served to deepen the culturally instituted rift between akvās and nirbāns. Akvās saw Noor’s public misrepresentation of khwaja siras as a direct attack on zennanas by hijras. Farah, who was non-emasculated, echoed this sentiment. “[W]hy do they appear on TV and say that they are by birth? Noor says this all the time. She claims that she is by birth, and those who stand on the streets at night are fake.” The public advocacy of certain nirbān activists produced frictions within the realm of activism, escalating hostility between khwaja sira leaders and between activist and ordinary gender ambiguous people.

The ideological differences between the two groups surfaced in a meeting organized by MHS where thirty prominent gurus and khwaja sira activists from across Pakistan were asked to define the meaning of various identity terms. “[T]hat meeting ended up in disaster because



everyone was fighting with each other,” said Kareem, the director of MHS. “The castrated ones think that they are at a higher position than the non-castrated ones.” Kareem highlights the detrimental impact of the hierarchal differences between hijras and zennanas.

The hostility between akvās and nirbāns posed a serious problem in the struggle for khwaja siras rights in Pakistan. In retaliation for their exclusion from the khwaja sira category, akvās threatened to expose truths about nirbāns.

[S]ome akvā murats found out that I was going to the SC to fight for a distinct gender category for khwaja siras. Two akvās planned that they will also go to the SC and tell the Chief Justice that people like Nirmal have gotten themselves operated... They wanted to defame us nirbān khwaja siras. But that day, thank God, there were too many cases and the Chief Justice postponed the date of the hearing.

Above, the Rawalpindi-based activist, Nirmal, suggests that akvās threatened the safety and respectability of emasculated gender ambiguous people. She feared that the reckless behavior of her zennana adversaries would ruin her reputation and possibly lead to her arrest.

Some nirbān activists, including Payal, supported akvās and included them in the khwaja sira category even though, in their public advocacy, they were mostly elusive about their support for them. In 2012, this ideological divide resulted in a televised dispute between activists Noor Vicky and Beena Shah. The incident was recorded outside the SC following one of the hearings that centered on the topic of khwaja sira parentage. The following excerpt is from Dunya News channel’s report about the incident.

A group of khwaja siras started fighting with Noor Vicky and her companions over the issue of whether the guru’s name should replace the father’s name [on national ID cards]... Prior to the fight, Noor Vicky complained to the court... that certain *normal* individuals were getting khwaja sira ID cards and misusing them... The SC order NADRA to resolve the issue of whose name to list on the ID card.

The news anchor’s statements were interspersed with comments made by the khwaja sira activists who were involved in the dispute. One of Noor’s followers was shown insulting Beena.

“Why are you interfering in the issues of us hijras? What have you got to do with us khwaja siras?” This statement was meant to disparage Beena as fake a khwaja sira. Although Beena was emasculated, her support of akvās made her the target of ridicule of her nirbān opponents<sup>93</sup>.

Noor’s student played on the cultural myth that khwaja sira networks had been infiltrated by charlatans who impersonated khwaja siras. According to the news report, Noor had complained to the court that certain “*normal* individuals” were registering for khwaja sira ID cards.

Following this incident, Express News invited Noor and Beena along with their followers to a talk show to discuss the dispute between both parties. Both leaders brought along with them an entourage of khwaja sira kin and supporters. During the debate, the two opposing groups began physically assaulting one another; amid the violent yelling and clapping, some participant’s clothes were ripped off while others were brutally beaten. The host helplessly threatened to shut down the studio as Noor and Beena silently watched the fight unravel from the safety of the stage. Eventually, some of the assailants were escorted out of the studio where the high drama continued.

Following the failed interview on Express News, Samaa TV did an interview with Noor, who was unaware that Beena would later join the live broadcast from Multan. The host began the show by asking Noor to define “khwaja sira,” to which she responded: “[A khwaja sira is]...[s]omeone who is not married, who doesn’t have a wife and kids, who cannot get married and is incapable of it.” Noor described khwaja siras strictly in corporeal terms, as individuals

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<sup>93</sup> Beena was in favor of listing the father’s name on khwaja sira ID cards, while Noor advocated having the guru’s name. Gender ambiguous people would inherit property depending on whose name appeared on their identification documents. Many nirbān khwaja siras like Noor, because they were estranged from or disowned by biological kin, wanted to become heirs to their guru’s property since they did not seek to benefit from parental inheritance. Unlike Beena and Noor, Payal insisted that khwaja siras be given the choice of listing either their father’s or their guru’s name in order to resolve the issue of parentage.

who did not possess functional male genitals. Soon after, Noor found herself ambushed when Beena was introduced on the show and asked to verify her opponent's claim.

Noor lies so much. She says that those who stand on the roads should be caught. Who do you think are the people who are standing in Pir Wadhia<sup>94</sup>? Who started a fight during a television shoot? These fake khwaja siras that she is talking about are her own students.

Quick to expose Noor's lies, Beena revealed that the individuals who her rival publically denounced as men were in fact members of her own family. However, when the host asked her to describe khwaja siras, Beena was uncharacteristically candid in her description.

Do you think khwaja siras are only those who are impotent? Here, we have khwaja siras who even have long beards. To be a khwaja sira is to have a soul that one naturally has from within. Khwaja siras are people who like covering their heads with scarves, and sitting demurely. Among them, 20% have less hormones, and 80% are fine, so they get married, and Allah gives them children. And there are also 50% who cannot have children. They too live among us.

Beena's response is slightly convoluted since her percentages do not add up. Importantly, her truthful public representation is an outlier since it diverges from the dominant khwaja sira practice of concealing the corporeality of gender ambiguous people. Although Beena evades the topic of physical emasculation, she reveals that a large number of gender ambiguous people are capable of heterosexual marriage and reproduction. I wondered what would drive an activist leader, who was known to engage in the techniques of concealment, to risk exposing truths about khwaja siras to the wider society. This is when I was reminded of something that Naima had once said to me: "If you want the truth, all you have to do is make hijras fight each other. They themselves will blurt the truth!" Likewise, television channels had managed to extract information from activists by pitting them against one another. The internal politics of the khwaja sira movement were so divisive that they threatened to topple the façade that gender

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<sup>94</sup> A town in Rawalpindi District.

ambiguous people had built to protect themselves from social stigma. Elements within the movement left it susceptible to internal collapse.

Many activists believed that the akvā-nirbān controversy was an offshoot of the selfish motives of khwaja sira leaders. Rani was convinced that Noor's primary objective was to protect her own interests over the rights of ordinary khwaja siras. She claimed that Noor's public stance against akvās was a means of safeguarding her business from external interferences. Noor was a wealthy khwaja sira with a large family of close 2,500 students, grand-students and great grand-students. According to the rumors that circulated within khwaja sira networks, Noor had imposed a tax on her kin, and that she made a commission on every party and ritual that took place within her dominion. This was Noor's business and the key to her fortune. Her opponents believed that in order to ensure the smooth functioning of her trade, Noor publically denounced akvās in an effort to avoid surveillance from state bodies and religious groups. Similarly, it was believed that Noor's staunch advocacy in favor of listing the names of gurus on khwaja sira ID cards was motivated by her ambition to inherit her own guru's property.

Further, within khwaja sira activist organizations, members frequently stigmatized one another on the basis of corporeal differences. Even activists, such as Payal, who were supportive of non-emasculated khwaja siras, were not above citing corporeal differences in order to ridicule or to morally differentiate themselves from other gender ambiguous people. For instance, during petty arguments, Payal had the tendency of ridiculing Nadia, her disciple and a core member of GSS, on the basis of her non-emasculated status. Once I heard Payal tell Nadia, "Go away, boy! What would you know! You have one!" Even though Payal supported them in her activism, she used the culturally devalued status of akvās to deride them during disputes. Activists tended to

perpetuate stigma within khwaja sira social and activist circles by employing such boundary-making practices to discriminate against one another.

One evening at AKS, a large group of khwaja siras gathered in the CBO's drop-in-center. When I heard that a community elder, Guru Basheer, was among those assembled in the room, I approached Shazia, who was standing by the entrance of the DIC with a few of her associates, and asked her to point out Guru Basheer. Before Shazia could respond, her colleague, Remal, quickly pointed towards an elderly individual in the room, and said. "He's the man sitting right there!" Her statement immediately elicited laughter from those standing around us. Guru Basheer was an older zennana who sported a moustache and was dressed in men's shalvār qamīz. Laughter and contempt were boundary-making practices employed by the CBO staff to distinguish Guru Basheer from other khwaja siras. Even though socially, politically and professionally he was enumerated as a khwaja sira because he possessed a feminine soul and was inducted into a zennana household, he was simultaneously considered inferior and less authentic due to his preference for masculine attire.

Allegiance to the khwaja sira lifestyle was viewed as the norm, and those who diverged from it were regularly shamed within khwaja sira social and activist circles. The lack of commitment of some "worldly" khwaja siras was also evident in their reluctance to engage in media advocacy. Those who lived dual lives between their khwaja sira and familial circles were not willing to appear on television, risk public exposure of their queerness, and bring shame upon their families. This further exacerbated the divide between zennanas/akvās and hijras/nirbāns.

### Sacrifice and Suspicion

Within activist circles, some gender ambiguous people contended that married khwaja siras should not benefit from the rights granted by the state. Payal often wondered if khwaja sira rights should be commensurate with a person's level of sacrifice. She argued that those who were married with children should not receive the same perks as nirbāns and those intent on remaining single. Married khwaja siras had the option of old-age security through their offspring, while emasculated gender ambiguous people had cut off ties with biological kin. For these reasons, Payal believed that the former should not profit from government schemes, and that state-sponsored opportunities should be limited to those who were truly deserving of assistance and were committed to the khwaja sira lifestyle.

In Karachi, the akvā-nirbān animosity worsened due to the educational disparities between the two groups. Not only were the Naguru lineage chiefs bothered by Payal's involvement in public affairs, but also they were annoyed that she had appointed akvās on her organization's executive committee. "They told her, 'You have left us nirbāns and gone after akvās,'" Shani related. "But Mother Payal knew that we were the ones who were going to run the operation and move the work forward." Payal had appointed akvās due to her inability to find any educated nirbāns to assist her in running GSS. Moreover, potential constituents may remain uninvolved in political activism if a social movement fails to represent them (Burdick 1998, 146). Payal was careful not to alienate akvās because they made up the majority of the genderqueer population and were therefore strategically valuable to the khwaja sira movement. Unfortunately, her close association with them deepened the divide between her and the lineage elders.

The distrust between akvās and nirbāns also constrained khwaja sira development. One evening at AKS, I asked Soni if she knew the names of the khusrah/hijra lineages based in

Lahore. Soni, an *akvā khwaja sira* who belonged to the *zennana* social network, did not have the information I was seeking. However, she made a couple of phone calls to her *hijra* contacts to try and get the information that I had requested. Unfortunately, extracting this information became a challenging task since none of the *nirbān gurus* were willing to disclose the names of their lineages. Most of them rebuffed Soni's request, and some were curious to know why *zennanas* were suddenly interested in learning about them. An hour into our research, Soni was frustrated and ready to give up. As we abandoned the task, she said that *hijras* becoming suspicious and nervous (*jhalakte*) when outsiders, including *zennanas*, question them about the inner workings of their communities.

### **Class Divide**

Class divides were another source of contention within activist spaces. Much of this conflict revolved around lower class *khwaja siras* and middle-class “transgender” identifying individuals. Class produced dissonance in identity, lived experience, values and skills. The dispute between Payal and Farah is illustrative of the class related constraints within activism.

### Class and Lack of Hijraness

Farah first met Payal through her friend, Aisha, who, at the time, was the general secretary of GSS. Farah was educated, English-speaking and belonged to a middle-class family. Initially, she believed that *hijras/khwaja siras* were completely different from transgender people. However, through Aisha she gradually began to see the similarities between the two gendered categories. Farah became more involved in GSS when Aisha passed away after a long battle with cancer, and she promised to assist Payal in running her organization. However, after Aisha's passing,

Payal resigned from activist work and retreated to Punjab for several months, leaving Farah in charge during her absence. The core members of GSS were upset at Payal for entrusting the organization to a new member who did not even identify as khwaja sira. Sometime after her departure from Karachi, Farah lost all contact with Payal. She tried to reach Payal on her cell phone to discuss urgent matters, but was unable to get through. Frustrated, Farah confided in Shani about Payal's shirking of her responsibilities. Shani, who was envious of Farah's growing prominence within GSS, seized the opportunity to encourage Farah to take charge and resolve the problem. Other core members also gave Farah their vote of confidence. "What she did not know was that I was in touch with Mān Payal that entire time," said Shani. "I had Man's other number and I would call her regularly and give her a full report of what Farah had been saying." Farah called a GSS meeting as soon as Payal returned from Punjab.

**Shani:** She was so disrespectful to Mother during the meeting. She asked her, "What work have you done for the organization in the last few months?" Her guru, Zara, said to her, "Farah...she is your elder...We should support her instead of talking like this."

**Payal:** That is because there is hijarpan in Zara. That day Farah wanted to become the president of GSS. She wanted me out. She had rallied every one against me when I was in Punjab. But at that time she was not aware of one thing. She was not familiar with hijarpan! She did not know that hijras say a lot behind each other's backs, but when they sit with other hijras, they always support each other. This is why she lost. She said that we should take a vote on who should be president. But I was sure that everyone had my back, so I told her that there was no need for a vote. That a simple show of hands would do. So we did that and everyone voted for me, which she wasn't expecting. In fact, she didn't get any position on the executive committee. She didn't see that coming.

Payal suggests that, as a covert body of knowledge and set of practices, hijarpan was the domain of khwaja siras—not of men, women or other sexual minorities. Only those who possessed hijraness could play it with each other and with unsuspecting outsiders. Payal indicates that Farah's ignorance led to her downfall within GSS; due to her lack of hijraness, Farah was uninformed about the respect accorded to seniors within khwaja sira communities. Her disregard for Payal's rank foiled Farah's attempt to oust her from GSS's presidency, and her ignorance of



the hijra norms of hierarchy only served to highlight her difference from khwaja siras. Farah also did not suspect, partly due to her unfamiliarity with hijraness, that the core team members of GSS were playing a carefully crafted game of deception with her. In organizational contexts, the art of trickery was counterproductive to the activist agenda. A happy collaboration between Payal and Farah would have been in GSS's best interest since the organization was in dire need of a skilled workforce. Unfortunately, activist leaders were often occupied in elaborate personal feuds that prevented them from focusing their energies on the larger problems facing their communities.

Farah's lack of hijarpan stemmed from her class difference from khwaja siras. Payal explained that Farah had lived a sheltered middle class life in her parental home, and growing up, had received little or no exposure to the culture of khwaja siras.

People who have spent their entire lives in comfort, they cannot understand the feelings of ordinary khwaja siras...[T]hey...wake up in flats, have a *mummy-daddy* situation...going to school, being dropped off and picked up in a car. Just recently she has become someone's celā...[but she]...has not lived with khwaja siras for a long time. She has never begged or been to a function. She's new to this field. What does she know about the sun and the shade.

Farah's lack of familiarity with the beliefs, practices and problems of lower class gender ambiguous people not only led to her downfall in GSS, but also made her an unsuitable representative of the dominant khwaja sira majority.

Farah found flaws in the hierarchal structure of the guru-celā system. She viewed the system as a detriment to the progress of gender ambiguous people, and took issue with the limited vision of lower class khwaja siras. "[A]ll they care about is this guru-celā business and nothing else," she said. "They do not want to change or learn anything new." Farah saw khwaja siras as backward and lacking in modernity. In contrast, not only was she educated, but had also benefited from attending international workshops and conferences. Farah was selected for these

opportunities precisely due to her middle-classness, that is, her educational background and proficiency in the English language. These trainings shaped her views on khwaja sira empowerment, which in turn, deepened the divide between Farah and Payal's distinct approach to activism. Eventually, Farah set up her own organization, MC, which specialized in serving and representing middle-class "transgender" youth.

### Residual Gayness

In Chapter 4 I explained why many transgender-identifying individuals formerly misidentified as gay. In activist contexts, khwaja sira leaders stigmatized middle-class transgender people on the grounds that many of them were ex-gays, an identity category that was despised by many khwaja siras. "Farah had a beard before, and she used to call herself gay," said Payal. "Her name was Zain. And now she's become one of us." Farah acknowledged that at the dawn of her sexual awakening, she erroneously miscategorized herself as gay. At the time, she had no knowledge of "transgender" as a queer category, and she thought hijras were intersexual people.

Within activist circles, the mistakes made by "transgender" people were attributed to their residual gayness. A year after the dispute between Payal and Farah, efforts were initiated to mend the relationship between members of GSS and MC. When Farah's misconduct with Payal was revisited during the meeting, Shani underscored Farah's gayness as the source of her bad behavior. "Listen Zara, you are a murat," said Shani to Farah's guru. "You were a murat from the beginning and you always will be. The concept of being gay is so strange to you, but Farah still has some of that gayness in her." Shani implied that Farah's latent gayness, which she had not been able to fully discard, was partly responsible for the conflict between GSS and MC and was responsible for her inability to adjust to the ways of khwaja siras.

## SRS Versus Nirbāni

Another boundary-making practice adopted by khwaja siras against middle-class gender ambiguous people was based on their preference for SRS over the nirbān operation. Farah and other members of MC, for instance, had acquired breast implants and been castrated while they saved up for the relatively expensive vaginoplasty procedure. However, post-SRS they would technically turn into women. In contrast, nirbān khwaja siras were identified by their state of being neither men nor women. Some gender ambiguous people, however, argued that a khwaja sira identity could be retained after SRS through membership in a zennana or hijra household.

In times of conflict, GSS members underscored the somatic differences between themselves and the members of MC. When Payal's problems with Farah escalated, she wished that her nemesis would obtain a vagina so that she could publically expose her as a woman.

The day she gets a vagina...[t]hat day I will go to the Press Club and hold a conference. I will call all the khwaja sira activists and together we will say that when she has gotten a vagina and changed her sex, then she has nothing to do with us khwaja siras. Then my path will be cleared off of her.

The GSS team regularly castigated Farah and her MC associates for their impending sex change. Markers of class and corporeal difference were routinely employed to erect boundaries between members of the two groups, and to exclude the latter from the khwaja sira construct. Initially, Farah resisted the guru-celā system as an oppressive social structure. However, she eventually decided to align herself with a khwaja sira household in order to gain protection from her opponents. In the event that she underwent SRS, Farah knew that GSS would be less likely to take a public stand against her if she were formally inducted into the khwaja sira social system.

## **Psychological Constraints**

### Vice, Stigma and Loss of Respect

The views of khwaja sira activists paralleled the beliefs of the wider society. They shared the pervasive attitudes related to moral conduct and sexual propriety that were held not only by large sections of the general public but also by most ordinary khwaja siras. These cultural ideals were replicated in the domain of khwaja sira activism where community leaders also suffered the harmful affects of social stigma.

One afternoon, Soni, a community activist, and her sixteen-year-old student, Shiza, told me about the *rape vālā gang*, a notorious group of young men who frequented Lava Lounge, a shīshā café in Lahore. Every Thursday and Saturday, Shiza visited Lava Lounge dressed in fitted jeans and a t-shirt with light makeup on her face. There she socialized with the café regulars, and at the end of the night, one or more of them would take her home. One day, a group of men visited the café. Unbeknownst to Shiza, they were members of the infamous rape vālā gang. Shiza flirted and danced with the men, and later that night, they took her to an unknown location where all fourteen of them gang raped her.

As they recounted the episode, Soni and Shiza seemed unfazed by the sheer violence of the incident. “It’s good for them. It opens them up,” said Soni in jest, and then added that Shiza herself was to be blamed for getting raped. Like many, Soni believed that immoral conduct invited sexual violence, and that those who lacked self-dignity should not expect to be respected by others. I was not surprised by Soni’s sentiment since it was one that I had previously heard from ordinary khwaja siras. However, I was dismayed to hear an activist echo a widely held view that stigmatized the victims instead of the perpetrators of violence. Many khwaja sira activists that I came across during fieldwork were of the opinion that promiscuity rightfully begets mistreatment. Moreover, khwaja sira leaders were generally afraid of speaking publically against

rape for it directly implicated genderqueer people with immoral behavior, and discredited the activist agenda, which revolved around dislodging khwaja siras from sex and sexuality. They feared that making an issue about sex scandals would bring undesired public attention to khwaja siras, which could potentially expose the extent of their involvement in socially, religiously and legally unacceptable sexual conduct.

### Low Self-Esteem and Lack of Unity

Although khwaja sira activists possessed leadership qualities, they too, like ordinary gender ambiguous people, suffered from low self-esteem. Their biographies were rife with episodes of ridicule, rejection and violence from family and society. The excerpt below details aspects of Payal's childhood, which she ascribed to her sense of low self-worth.

When I used to go to school, often I would get beaten up. I didn't know how to fight. I would just cry like girls...[D]uring childhood, I was kept hidden from other relatives. I was not allowed to go out. This gave me a lot of stress. I used to wonder why I was treated like that but not my other siblings. And then when I started mingling with khwaja siras, and wanted to hang out with them, my relatives would...make fun of me. Whenever my relatives would gather and talk, they would praise each other's kids. So and so's daughter did some great deed or is really good in his studies...At times like this, I would feel very small. I would get very angry. Everyone is praised, but why not me?

As an adult, Payal was haunted by childhood memories of familial abuse, which affected her as a community activist. Khwaja sira leaders were constrained by their mental stumbling blocks despite years of participation in activist work.

The effects of social stigma, discrimination and low self-esteem reverberated within activist contexts where khwaja sira leaders sought to compete against instead of working in tandem with one another<sup>95</sup>. "As far as their activism is concerned, I have noticed that it is merely

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<sup>95</sup> In Chapter 4 I explained that many khwaja siras projected a superior sense of self, which came from being young, beautiful and having many admirers. This superiority complex served to

for the self-promotion of individual activists rather than for the rights of TGs as a whole,” said Nadeem, the project manager of AKS. “This is the drawback of their movement.” Competition between leaders splintered the khwaja sira movement, forming organizational and regional clusters of cooperation and resentment. Rather than focusing all of their energy on the empowerment of gender variant Pakistanis, khwaja sira leaders spent much time on shameless self-promotion, outdoing one another, and resolving inter- and intra-organizational conflicts. Just the way ordinary khwaja siras competed with one another to be more physically attractive, have more admirers, and to earn more money, activists were consumed with attaining more power, a larger following of supporters, and fame and fortune. The professional jealousies between them were products of their low self-worth and façade of superiority.

It was not unusual for members of khwaja sira organizations to be envious of each other’s accomplishments. For instance, the battle between Payal and Farah contained an element of jealousy. Soon after she joined GSS, Farah was nominated to represent Pakistan at international conferences even though Payal and other members of the organization, who had been toiling for years, had not received similar offers. Payal complained that Farah was only interested in promoting herself. “[S]he has always put herself forward. When she was in GSS, she would only talk about herself instead of promoting the organization.” Ameer lamented that, “Payal and Farah could have worked really well together because each had qualities that the other did not possess. Instead, they wanted to further themselves, which is why they ended up fighting and parting.”

The feud between Noor Vicky and Beena was exacerbated by the personal and professional jealousies between the two activists. Among the things that Beena took issue with

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conceal their low self-worth, and was a coping mechanism against the rejection, ridicule and violence they experienced in everyday life. Khwaja siras gave vent to social injustice and oppression by competing against other gender ambiguous people and by unleashing their anger upon them during times of conflict.

was Noor's public declaration that she was the leader of all khwaja siras in Pakistan. In reality, Noor's reach was limited to her immediate region in Rawalpindi, based on the longstanding tradition of earning area chiefs. However, aggravated by her claims, Beena staged a protest in Multan against Noor to publically denounce her leadership. In retaliation to Noor naming her organization, Shemale Coalition of Pakistan, Beena named her group All Pakistan Shemale Federation in order claim a broader scope for her own leadership. Noor shamed Beena for being jealous of her during a confrontation between the two on national television.

You have become a victim of jealousy due to my appearances on TV. Tomorrow again I will be appearing on another big channel. You can watch that too. And again tonight at 7:30PM. I will keep appearing on TV, and you will keep getting jealous. Don't get jealous or else you will get wrinkles on your face.

Noor laughed ominously as she successfully delivered an insult to Beena. Before Beena, Noor had competed for power with her archenemy, Nirmal, who landed in hospital in the aftermath of a violent standoff between the two.

Personal jealousies also created rifts between activists and their khwaja sira kin. For example, Naima accused her guru, Payal, for stifling her efforts to earn a living and achieving celebrity status. Below, she describes the game of deception Payal played with her in order to avert her from achieving success in the public sphere.

Samaa TV was making a documentary on khwaja siras... Whatever they kept asking, I kept telling them because they were giving us money. I got a hijra married to a man and they shot it. Eventually, the film was shown on TV and everyone saw it... Then my guru called and told me that the cops were looking for me because I had arranged an illegal marriage. I got scared, but there were no police vālās after me. My guru kept scolding me everyday and I kept listening. Then Samaa TV called me again to arrange a cricket match for khwaja siras. I told them that I will never appear on TV because my guru had said that cops are after me. They asked me for my guru's number and I gave it to them. When they spoke with her, she struck a deal of her own, and the TV channel casted her and I was left out. Then I realized that what my guru really wanted was to appear on TV herself. I had been popular on TV for so long, but after she came on TV, she became popular and people in every household started recognizing her. So she got ahead and I've made no progress.

Naima echoed the discourse of rivalry among khwaja siras where gender ambiguous people competed with one another for fame and fortune, and inhibited their contenders from getting ahead. Naima believed that Payal had manipulated her in order to steal her livelihood and growing popularity. Although I do not discredit Naima's conviction, it appeared that Payal also wanted to prevent her disciple from negatively representing khwaja siras and counteracting the activist agenda of humanizing them in mainstream society.

Competition and conflict within activist circles consumed community leaders and prevented them from focusing on the empowerment of ordinary khwaja sira. Although khwaja siras routinely acknowledged that their lack of unity was a deterrent to their advancement, few were able to apprehend that social stigma, structural violence and low self-esteem were at the heart of this problem. Khwaja siras were often reprimanded by ordinary people within NGO and media sectors for working against one another instead of inculcating change within their communities. However, little emphasis was placed within NGOs on the need to develop programs that could address the problem of stigma and low self-esteem among khwaja siras.

### The Activist's Habitus

In everyday life, activists were constrained by the force of the habitus (Bourdieu 2008, 82-3), the pre-existing and unconscious structures within and against which they conducted their organizational goals. Activist domains, despite being propelled by a vision for progress and change, were not free from this inhibiting influence. As subjects of their time and place, khwaja sira activists were not above the limitations imposed by their immediate sociocultural environments. In 2013, I attended AKS's annual social and cultural event, which was attended by khwaja siras, gay allies, and representatives of sexual health NGOs and the Punjab AIDS



Control Program. The entertainment for the event included situational parodies, which were organized by AKS's non-khwaja sira staff members. A few khwaja sira guests were randomly selected to perform a number of improvised skits. One of the situations was to enact a fight with a gender ambiguous person who had stolen her lover. The enactment was meant to showcase the aggression and humor in fights between khwaja siras. This skit played on the oft-televised spectacle of khwaja sira catfights, where participants were shown clapping and physically and verbally abusing one another.

The drawback of these parodies was that they not only made a mockery of an already marginalized population but they also directly involved them in dehumanizing enactments. The parodies were reminiscent of the way in which khwaja siras were treated historically as comedic figures intended for public entertainment. The segment did a disservice to AKS's vision of promoting the dignity, respect and wellbeing of and social justice for khwaja siras by reinforcing their socially marginal position. Importantly, khwaja siras typically engaged in these comedic representations, an expected facet of their livelihood, in their daily struggle to earn a living. Likewise, as gender-bending entertainers, the khwaja sira guests at the event enjoyed the segment while the activists affiliated with AKS were complicit in perpetuating stereotypical images of gender variant people as subhuman caricatures of ordinary citizens. The activists' habitus promoted their compliance with stigmatizing images that begged the question aptly posed by Farah: "Until and unless you accept and respect yourself, how can you expect others to respect you?"

### **Collaboration and Conflict with Gay Men**

The relationship between khwaja siras and gay men was both antagonistic and collaborative within activist and NGO contexts. Ordinary khwaja siras considered gay men to be morally inferior, expressed aversion for their sexual practices, and viewed gay sex workers as competition. These everyday conflicts were replicated in institutionalized spaces, even though the confluence of genderqueer and gay people produced some positive outcomes.

When I started fieldwork in early 2011, khwaja sira activists and gay men barely had any professional working relationships. However, that year, members of GSS and other organizations began to develop ties with the gay employees of MHS who had begun to reach out to khwaja sira leaders. MHS was preparing to launch a number of CBOs for TGs and their work necessitated that they build relationships with khwaja siras. That same year, the GSS team came into contact with a few other LGB groups that included a circle of about fifteen young middle-class gay friends who met regularly in the city's Johar Mor district.

Five or six years ago, gays didn't like talking to us at all. They would say, "He's a hijra!" But after seeing former gays like Farah and Aisha, who came into our field and did so well for themselves, gays have started to open up to us. And God has given us respect and we got our rights. So, now they are thinking that they should also get rights.

Payal believed that the new alliances that were being formed between gender variant and gay people were motivated by the changing legal landscape wherein khwaja siras had gained rights. Payal suspected that gay men desired social and legal recognition for which they sought to benefit from a close affiliation with khwaja siras. Although the GSS team welcomed the positive change in the attitude of gay men towards gender ambiguous people, they had not forgotten that the same individuals used to ridicule and keep away from khwaja siras.

Even though the hostility between the two groups did not completely dissipate, the growing social exchange between them produced a level of mutual ease that was previously absent. Over the course of that year, I observed the GSS team making a concerted effort to

understand gay men and vice versa. Payal's views about them changed slightly once she started spending time with her new gay friends, and she began to notice the overlaps between khwaja sira and gay identities. For instance, Payal observed that the feminine soul was pronounced in a large majority of her gay contacts, many of whom were effeminate, enjoyed cross-dressing, used feminine pronouns, and had adopted the khwaja sira Farsi. Similarly, one of the statements that was repeatedly articulated by different members of the Johr Mor group was, "Even though we are gay, we have the same rūh." One day during my last month in the field, Payal said to me, "Now I'm beginning to think that there is little distance between gays and us. Their emotions are the same, but their views are a little different. I think that a khwaja sira is hidden somewhere within every gay." This realization was significant for a khwaja sira such as Payal who had never had a high regard for gay men.

Through this "logic of affinity" (Day 2005), khwaja sira and gay groups managed to forge alliances with one another despite their social differences. Singh and Conway note that "convergence [across difference] is by definition, fluid, episodic and ephemeral" (Singh and Conway, 2011: 697), which explains why amity towards gay men tended to change very quickly in times of conflict. Nonetheless, the very fact that khwaja siras and gay men had begun to associate with one another was significant. This was a remarkable transformation made possible by the confluence of transnational donor funding, sexual health NGOs, khwaja sira activism and legal reform. In discussing "women" as an analytic category, feminist theorists have emphasized the strategic value of "provisional unities" as a political enterprise that goes beyond the articulation of a unified identity (Butler 21, 2002; Mohanty 1991, 69). Likewise, Payal realized that strategic coalitions with other sexual minorities could benefit her resource-starved

organization, especially since gay men were educated and capable of assisting in securing grants to keep GSS afloat.

However, not all khwaja sira activists were as sympathetic towards gay men. When I returned to Pakistan in early 2013, MHS had set up several CBOs where it had employed both khwaja siras and gay people. As a result of MHS's intervention, professional ties between khwaja siras and gays were established. However, activists, such as Noor Vicky and Beena, who were not affiliated with these organizations, continued to be openly hostile towards gay men. In late 2012, the Coalition for the Rights of Khwaja Siras (CRKS), an alliance of khwaja sira organizations in Sindh and Punjab, held a meeting in Lahore, which was attended by community leaders. Nadeem, AKS's gay-identifying manager, also participated in the event along with his staff member and khwaja sira activist, Soni. However, Nadeem's presence created a stir at the meeting. "When I sat down, Beena asked loudly if I was a khwaja sira, and when I said no, she told me very rudely to leave," said Nadeem. "I tried to explain to her that I work with khwaja siras even though I am not a khwaja sira. Then, Soni intervened. She played a supportive role." Below, Soni explains how she reasoned with Beena.

I said to her, "Beena you are my sister, and I will never say anything bad to you. But this is Nadeem, he is a human being, and on top of that, he is my manager. How he identifies himself and how he thinks is his own decision. He has a life of his own so who am I or you or anyone else to interfere in his life. We consider ourselves murats because this is our life and no one has the right to tell us that we are not murats. If anyone says anything to Nadeem, then I don't think I should participate in this meeting. There are some people here who are married and they even have children but they call themselves khwaja siras. We should first kick them out of here before Nadeem." Then she shut up.

Soni's interpolation helped to diffuse the situation. As Nadeem succinctly put it: "Where there are khwaja siras who discriminate, there are also those who are supportive."

The intermingling of gay and gender ambiguous individuals within institutionalized contexts produced both cooperation and conflict. Some khwaja sira activists had a tough time

being subordinate to gay men, especially in light of their perceived inferiority. AKS's gender variant staff regularly subverted Nadeem's authority, particularly due to his sexual orientation. Moreover, they resented the fact that gay men were controlling funds to run "TG" organizations, and many believed that their gay supervisors were misappropriating money that was meant for the advancement of their communities. AKS, which was a community-based organization that was supposed to be run by khwaja siras, was being led by gay men due to lack of qualified gender ambiguous people who could fill managerial roles<sup>96</sup>. Khwaja sira activists believed that they were the rightful leaders of TG CBOs instead of their gay supervisors. Consequently, they were suspicious of and harbored professional jealousies towards gay men in the NGO sector.

We have only had problems with khwaja siras since we started working. They've threatened us and they have protested against us because we weren't giving them jobs. They sent the police to raid our office in Karachi, they took gangsters into our Lahore office, and they complained about us to the Intelligence Bureau in Rawalpindi.

The conflicts between gay men and khwaja sira activists, many of whom were employed at these CBOs, hindered productivity in activist and NGO circles. The hostility and mistrust demonstrated by khwaja sira leaders spoke in part to their insecurities and marginalization. Without an education, they lacked an understanding of how grant funding was allocated and utilized. Not having visibility to this process made them susceptible to misgivings about the use of donor funds.

Further, the khwaja sira employees of transnational CBOs found the policies of their organizations to be intrusive and at odds with their culture. For instance, AKS prohibited its employees from forging kinship bonds with one another in order to prevent clusters of authority

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<sup>96</sup> The reason why gay men were selected for these positions instead of qualified heterosexual candidates was due to their similarities and potential to assimilate with gender ambiguous people. "Gay people are emotionally similar to khwaja siras, they dance with TGs, and it is easier for them adopt the culture of TGs, so we thought it was better practice for us to hire gay rather than straight people," said Nadeem.

and loyalty from forming within the organization. A parallel system of hierarchy would threaten to undermine AKS's organizational power structure. When Guru Mir and Shazia decided to become mother and daughter, the organization's management intervened to stop them from performing the ritual. This upset the khwaja sira staff members who interpreted their employer's actions as an affront to their rituals and traditions. "We become intimate with those with whom we spend most of our time, and in our case, those are mostly the khwaja siras at AKS, so obviously we will want to establish relationships with them," said Soni. "But they are trying to control us and change our culture!" Soni believed that her gay employers were attempting to weaken the traditional stronghold of khwaja siras and trying to undermine their authority. Fed up with AKS's regulations, Soni hoped to one day set up her own organization that, like GSS, would be governed in keeping with the norms of the khwaja sira social system. Unfortunately, indigenous khwaja sira organizations had their own limitations, such as lack of resources and the debilitating impact of the patriarchal power structure of khwaja siras. Gay and khwaja sira organizing in Pakistan were not only interdependent and mutually beneficial, but also entangled in thorny power relationships that renewed conflict between these two queer minority groups.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter mirrors Chapter 4 to the extent that it demonstrates that the problems experienced within khwaja sira communities were reproduced within activist organizations. The negative effects of social stigma permeated these spaces, and activists' unconscious constraints stifled their ability to overcome the obstacles plaguing their movement. These conditions, rooted in self-stigma and low self-esteem, generated conflict among activists along the lines of rank, ethnicity, corporeality, identity, and class. There were, however, a few exceptions where khwaja sira

organizing fostered alliances across social difference among sexual and gender minorities. These were rare moments that allowed activists to make the structure enabling for themselves, though often for personal gain.

## **Chapter 7: Identity Politics, Strategic Essentialisms and Incoherence**

Coined and later retracted by Gayatri Spivak, “strategic essentialism” (Danius et al. 1993; Spivak 1990) refers to the pragmatic necessity of using identity categories to advance political claims in the public domain. These strategic identities are intended for the purpose of forging alliances across social difference to promote the success of collective political action (Mohanty 1991, 69). Although the purported homogeneity of identity is an illusion, it can still be deployed “to displace hegemonic knowledges and structures of oppression” (Alcoff 2000, 323). Alternatively, “presenting a unified picture of social movements means choosing some subalterns over others, [and if]...we do not pay attention to alternative or multiple subjectivities within movements...we are likely to miss (or misunderstand) broader...trajectories” (Wolford 2010, 12). Strategic essentialisms have played an important role in both facilitating and constraining khwaja sira activism. I argue that the essentialisms deployed by activist leaders were beneficial to gender ambiguous people but they also produced incoherence. On the one hand, they promoted the security of khwaja siras, and enabled community leaders to articulate a virtual identity that misrepresented gender variant Pakistanis as a unified populace. On the other hand, they played a role in impeding the state’s efforts to “mainstream” khwaja siras. The ambiguity that activist leaders perpetuated through these essentialisms, created confusion within state bodies that reverberated back into khwaja sira communities.

### **Identity Terminology**

The institutionalization of the term “khwaja sira” elucidates how it gained popularity in contemporary Pakistan, and how it has come to be imagined by different groups of people partly due to the identity politics of community leaders. I begin this chapter by detailing the various



khwaja sira identity terms that were used within institutionalized contexts by key stakeholders (e.g., activist organizations, NGOs, government departments), and how khwaja siras were perceived within these domains. The mixed meanings of khwaja sira and the varied understandings of gender ambiguous people within activist, NGO and government quarters are indicative of the general sense of incertitude towards nonnormative genders and sexualities.

### Activist Terminology

The term “khwaja sira” lost currency when eunuchs lost their royal functions upon the downfall of the Mughal Empire, but it was revitalized in the first decade of the new millennium, owing to the efforts of community leaders and to the legal recognition of khwaja siras by the Pakistani state. Below, Payal explains how she came to be acquainted with the word.

The first time I heard the word “khwaja sira” was from my grand-guru. At first, I thought it was a weird word, but when she told me its importance, I only wanted to be called khwaja sira. But it took years to make it happen, and for the last few years it’s being used. When we first started protesting and newspapers would cover our story, they would say, “Hijras had a demonstration.” Once they published a photo of me and Aisha, and under the photo it said, “Two hijras are having a conversation.” I felt so bad about it. Then I told everyone to stop saying hijra. “We are khwaja siras,” I would say. And gradually this change came about, and the media started saying khwaja sira. Once people used to call us many things, but now we have a respectful term.

Activist leaders took credit for promoting khwaja sira as an identity label in mainstream society.

The term gained further popularity through the SC hearings on the rights of third sex/gender people in which activists encouraged the use of “khwaja sira.” Research participants admitted to hearing the term in the mid-2000s either through the media advocacy of community leaders or through their personal connections with them. As an identity construct then, the category “khwaja sira” was as an “expansion” of the norm, in the sense developed by Susan Seizer (2000),

given that it stretched the previous normative boundary beyond the use of derogatory terms, such as hijra and khusrah.

The appropriation of “khwaja sira” was strategically advantageous. In the conversation below, the members of GSS explain why they adopted it as an identity label.

**Shabnam:** There are so many terms we could have chosen, but we chose “khwaja sira.”

**Payal:** This is what we wanted people to call us. People would always use the term “hijra” for us, which I did not like because hijra is a strange word.

**Shabnam:** It is not respectful.

**Payal:** But khwaja sira is a word of respect. We use all kinds of words when we’re among ourselves. But when we are being respectful or when we talk to television channels, then we only call ourselves khwaja siras.

**Shazia:** Another reason for using “khwaja sira” instead of hijra is that it is an Urdu word. “Hijra” is used in India, but in Pakistan, Muslims should say “khwaja sira.”

**Payal:** In Punjabi we are called khusrah, Sindhis say *faqīr*, Balochis say something else. In every language there is a different word for us. But we should have one word, and in Urdu, that is khwaja sira.

**Shabnam:** In olden times, they used to keep khwaja siras to guard the palace.

**Payal:** And we also have the special blessings of Khwaja Gharib-un-Nawaz of Ajmer.

This exchange illustrates that, as an identity category, “khwaja sira” was meant to essentialize, territorialize and nationalize gender ambiguous people. Though not explicitly stated above, the term khwaja sira, as popularly understood in present-day Pakistan, strategically characterized gender variant people as hermaphrodites, that is, as individuals whose state was biologically determined by no fault of their own. Undeniably, arguments in favor of queer rights are more persuasive when sexual difference is framed as being natural rather than a choice.

Moreover, this ancient title located gender ambiguous people in the nation’s cultural history, giving them a sedimented identity. The adoption of “khwaja sira” was an act of reclaiming this history along with the cultural perceptions associated with Mughal era khwaja siras. Appropriating this title of honor was an “atavistic response” (Nash 2005, 15) or a form of “recovery work” (Puar 1998, 411) through which khwaja sira activists attempted to recast into the present the respect accorded to imperial khwaja siras. Activists favored “khwaja sira”

because it denoted respect and was devoid of the negative connotations associated with words like hijra, khusrah, zennana, and khadrā.

Importantly, as Shazia suggests, the term provided religious and cultural authentication to gender ambiguous people by grounding them in the South Asian Muslim past of the Subcontinent, one that was distinct from the Hindu tradition. Through this “politics of insertion” (Khan 2011, 395), khwaja sira activists claimed cultural belonging as Muslims and Pakistani citizens. That a revered Sufi Saint blessed khwaja siras served as further validation of their privileged status in Islam. Additionally, Payal suggests that “khwaja sira” functioned as an umbrella category that was intended to unify gender ambiguous people along the lines of ethnic, linguistic, corporeal and gendered difference. In effect, the use of the term by genderqueer Pakistanis was a collective manipulation of language and history, but one through which this marginalized segment of the population claimed respect, cultural and biological legitimacy, internal unity, and social and national inclusion.

Nevertheless, “khwaja sira” was a highly contested term, and there was no firm consensus among activist and ordinary khwaja siras about who should be enumerated under this identity construct. The core members of GSS took khwaja sira to refer to anyone who possessed a feminine soul (rūh) irrespective of corporeal status. Payal included zennanas/akvās in the khwaja sira framework even though she held grudges with them in her personal life. However, some prominent activist leaders publically denounced zennanas/akvās as male imposters.

Hijra and zennana communities beyond GSS and Karachi had also adopted khwaja sira as an inclusive identity category. One hot October afternoon, Payal, Soni and I rented a car and drove from Lahore to Kasur, a small city along the Pakistan-India border, to visit a group of zennanas who had set up a CBO named Saya Development Foundation. Upon our arrival, we

met our hosts, a group of effeminate zennanas who were dressed in men's shalvār qamīz and sported mustaches. A few wore feminine accessories, such as light makeup and scarves. Once seated inside Saya's office, I noticed that the walls were covered with posters. One in Urdu had the motto of the organization: "The support of the rights of khwaja siras is our duty." During the meeting that followed, Saya's representatives identified themselves as khwaja siras, and emphasized the need for zennanas and hijras to work collectively to build a stronger alliance. As khwaja siras, zennanas benefitted from the rights granted to third sex/gender people by the Supreme Court (e.g., the right to vote and take public office, inheritance right, job and education quotas, welfare support, as well as legal and social recognition). In contrast, other sexual minorities, such as homosexual men, enjoyed neither legal protection nor respect in society. Hence, the "imperative to form bounded populations" through the appropriation of culturally recognized identity categories was "to access governmental policies" (Dutta 2013, 13).

GSS was one of the few organizations that had appropriated "transgender" as a synonym for "khwaja sira." The reason for selecting this label over others terms had to do with the organization's longstanding consultative relationship with and dependence on sexual health NGOs that used "transgender" and "TG" to refer to zennanas and hijras. Moreover, "transgender" resonated with group members because it resembled "khwaja sira" as an umbrella category that subsumed other gendered and sexed typologies, such as transvestite and transsexual. Unlike GSS, other khwaja sira organizations were drawn to the English word "shemale," which gained popularity when khwaja sira activist, Noor Vicky, named her organization "Shemale Coalition of Pakistan." Activists from other parts of the country followed suit by adding the word shemale to the title of their own organizations.

## NGO Terminology

NGOs tend to use a unique set of terms to describe the sexual minority groups they support. The reliance of the LGBT movement in the United States on the neoliberal funding regime and constructions of acceptable queerness (Ward 2008, 11-13) can be likened to the ties between international donor agencies and local recipients within the NGO industrial complex. Dependent upon grant funding for HIV/AIDS prevention from foreign entities, local queer groups adopt the cultural capital of their transnational donors, that is, they draw upon either Euro-American or indigenous identity terms, or some combination of both, in keeping with the dictates of international funders and the personal preferences of elite NGO leaders. On the ground-level, however, queer communities had their own distinct classifications (e.g., khwaja sira, zennana, hijra) which did not always match NGO-speak.

Khwaja siras who had professional ties with rights-based NGOs and those who were employed by such organizations had started using NGO jargon, such as “transgender” and “TG” in everyday speech. Alternatively, khwaja sira activists drove sexual health organizations to accept their preferred indigenous terminology (i.e., khwaja sira) over hijra, which was more widely used in HIV intervention programs throughout South Asia. In other words, each had influenced the other to some degree. That gender ambiguous people had managed to exercise some control over the identity frameworks within the NGO sector was partly attributable to the rise in the significance of CBOs among foreign donors, who were increasingly interested in authenticating queer groups and “supporting a diversity of niche causes across the globe” (Dave 2008: 393), such as smaller organizations that were run by and for specific minority groups. The semi-independent structure of these CBOs gave khwaja siras some degree of power in decisions related to issues of representation.

NGOs involved in HIV intervention in Pakistan adhered to the MSM framework. MSM was not an identity but indicative of the behavior of all males who had sex with males, which typically included khwaja siras since they were born with male genitals<sup>97</sup>. MHS and its affiliate CBOs placed TGs within the MSM framework due to the following overlaps between the two categories: 1) the birth-sex of both groups was male, 2) they were attracted to the male body, 3) they experienced a contradiction between their socially expected and individually desired sexual behavior, 4) like TGs, many MSM were effeminate, and 5) both bore the social cost of being effeminate. However, the khwaja siras who were affiliated with these CBOs resisted the MSM framework since they did not wish to be identified as males/men.

Paralleling gay men's perception of kothis in India (Gupta 2005, 128), gay-identifying NGO workers in Pakistan perceived zennanas as homosexual men rather than khwaja siras or transgender. They believed that the absence of culturally grounded models of homosexuality in Pakistan resulted in their misidentification as hijras and zennanas. This line of reasoning assumed that the biological truth of sexuality was erroneously subsumed by a backward cultural model of dominant queerness. The uncritical adoption of Euro-American understandings of sexuality, that is, as a fixed and defining component of a person's identity (Khanna 2007, 166-8), did not correspond to the experience of many local queer groups for whom sexual identities were

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<sup>97</sup> The historical transformations that took place in the MSM framework as an umbrella category did not seem to apply in Pakistan. In India, for instance, MSM initially included gender ambiguous people, but the two were eventually deemed separate categories based on the insights gleaned from new research and community consultation. However, CBOs in Pakistan continued to adhere to the older classification of MSM as an umbrella category inclusive of TGs. This framework was subdivided into three categories: 1) The gendered framework referred to sexual contact between two males where one assumed the masculine role and the other the feminine role. Hijras and zennanas mostly fell into this framework. 2) The discharge framework included those who had sex with either men or women in order to release body heat, which was believed to develop as a result of pent up sexual urges. 3) The gay framework included those who identified as gay.

fluid, situated and imbricated. Western notions of sexuality lost sight of the fact that, in addition to identity, desire was also socioculturally shaped. Many constructionists argue that culture has the power to influence desire, be it the direction of gendered or erotic interest or object choice (Vance 2005, 20).

Nonetheless, the attitudes of gay NGO employees suggest that zennanas were not privy to the deeper veracity of sexuality as a result of their class background, lack of education and exposure. Indeed, human beings are prone to mimicking the cultural models that are available to them; the more the models the greater will be the diversity in queer identification and practice. Exposure to alternative modes of queerness may indeed influence zennana self-perception. However, the etic notions of NGO officials were impositions that ignored the subjective experiences of zennanas, and overlooked the cultural processes of acculturation that instilled genderqueer desires in seemingly homosexual subjects. Although some homosexual men (i.e., zankas) did indeed misidentify as khwaja sira while others joined khwaja siras networks simply to enjoy the benefits of membership (e.g., easy access to parties and men), to insist that all zennanas were homosexual was to deny gender ambiguous subjects the right to self-identification.

Moreover, MHS's English-speaking gay staff was unhappy with the appropriation of the term "khwaja sira" by hijras and zennanas. On our way to a khwaja sira's house, MHS representatives, Saif and Ali, said that "khwaja sira" was problematic since everyone did not identify with the term, and that it was confusing too because its historical meaning diverged from the way in which it had been appropriated. Saif believed that an entirely new word should be invented for khwaja siras. In contrast, I suggest that the term had gained salience both among gender ambiguous people and the general public. Hence, instead of inventing a new term, NGOs

and khwaja sira activists should seek to transform the way the general public understood “khwaja sira” and work towards developing social acceptance of zennanas and hijras. Importantly, a new term could be potentially dangerous, especially if it was not historically and culturally grounded, in which case, it could be viewed as a foreign threat to Pakistani society. Although Ali reflected on it, Saif did not seem convinced with my argument.

Similarly, MHS’s director, Kareem, was displeased with the problems posed by khwaja sira identity politics. The public belief that a true khwaja sira was (or should be) an intersexual person was reinforced within NGOs, even by gay identifying staff members who worked closely with gender ambiguous people and were privy to the truth about their somatic composition. Kareem acknowledged that even though he respected gender ambiguous people’s choice of self-identification, it was his personal belief that the term khwaja sira by definition applied to intersexual people. Further, he disagreed with the self-framing of zennanas as khwaja siras.

Ideally, I think a khwaja sira is someone who is born with ambiguous genitals, a hijra is someone who is castrated...and a zennana is a feminized man. A zennana is an MSM along with gay identifying boys. This is how in my mind things should be just to get things more organized, but I still respect anybody who says whatever they are.

Kareem adhered to the dominant understanding of sexual identities and seemed unwilling to modify his personal structuring of indigenous queers even though he claimed to respect their self-identification.

[W]hatever your identity is, you need to first define it. You can’t just start throwing terms around because you like the sound of it. It doesn’t make sense. It confuses other people and it confuses you. Over time, I have come to the conclusion that we should respect whatever the person wants to identify as...If people want to call themselves khwaja sira, fine...But I still think there needs to be a definition.

Kareem emphasized the need for clear identity definitions and neat classifications because organizing target populations into distinct groups was crucial to “knowing, manipulating, and managing bodies” (Pigg and Adams 2005, 1), and providing appropriate services to beneficiaries



in HIV intervention programs. Due to the lack of consensus over the meaning of “khwaja sira” among community activists, Kareem categorized indigenous sexual minorities by taking a lead from dominant culture, and by privileging prevalent identity framings within the NGO sector and his own personal views about sexual diversity. However, his cartography was not only divorced from the ground realities of gender variant Pakistanis but it also failed to account for temporal shifts in meaning and identification.

### Government Terminology

At the governmental level, several identity terms gained prominence over others, and many of them were products of the Supreme Court proceedings on khwaja siras. In the series of hearings that took place between 2009-2012, a few prominent figures played a role in influencing the state’s choice of identity classifications. The most prominent among these were khwaja sira activist, Noor Vicky, and the human rights lawyer who filed a petition on behalf of gender ambiguous people in the SC, Aslam Khaki. As an expert on Islamic jurisprudence, Khaki provided the court with information about Islamic approaches to sex/gender ambiguity, while relying on Noor’s input on khwaja sira identity nomenclature. Consequently, the judiciary and the government began using the terms “khwaja sira” and “shemale” interchangeably for gender ambiguous people. During the hearings, Noor propagated the term “shemale,” which made its way into court documents along with other terms, such as eunuchs and middle sex. Eventually, the term gained currency at the national and provincial levels when government departments began using it in official documents<sup>98</sup>. Alternatively, the government’s chosen referents for

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<sup>98</sup> For instance, documents on khwaja siras were contained in dusty files marked ‘shemale’ at the Social Welfare Department in Karachi.

gender ambiguous people would have been different had some other khwaja sira activist attended the hearings instead of Noor.

In November 2011, the SC ordered NADRA, the country's citizen registration department, to issue national identity cards to khwaja siras by giving them the option to register in one of the following three categories: 1) Male (khwaja sira), Female (khwaja sira), and Khusna-e-mushkil. These three classes bore resemblance to Islamic classifications of intersexuality, which include those whose anatomy is similar to male genitalia, female genitalia or neither male nor female genitalia (i.e., indeterminable). However, the SC and the government were vague about how they defined the above three khwaja sira classifications. Through my personal exchange with Aslam Khaki in 2013, however, it became clear that the court deliberately left the meaning of khwaja sira open to interpretation in order to accommodate all those who self-identified as khwaja sira (see *Gender Verification* and *The Perils of Taxonomic Regulation* for more information).

The significance of the identity terminology appropriated in activist and national discourse cannot be undervalued. The vocabulary used can deeply impact a movement and its target populations. Pakistan's stance on the UN Resolution on LGBT Rights is a case in point. This resolution was severely condemned by Pakistan in 2011 partly because "LGBT" sexualities were perceived as immoral foreign threats to the country. Pakistan's stance against LGBT rights in the global arena was ironic given that the country had already recognized the rights of its genderqueer citizens. Evidently, the Pakistani envoy to the UN did not consider the "T" in LGBT to include khwaja siras. Like most Pakistanis, it appears that he too viewed khwaja siras as intersexuals. This bolsters the argument that locally constructed, culturally grounded and religiously endorsed conceptions of queerness have greater potential for acceptance in

mainstream Pakistani society. In contrast, foreign queer constructs, such as LGBT, were regarded as threats to Pakistani sovereignty, culture and religious norms. The country's official position on the UN resolution for LGBT rights speaks to the power of language and indigenous terminology, which, though limiting, played a critical role in facilitating positive policy changes for gender ambiguous people.

### Institutionalization of Dominant Discourses

Dominant ideas related to khwaja siras were reproduced within activist and institutionalized contexts, where the language used to refer to them impacted the direction of their activism. Here again, the multiplicity of the Pakistani public emerged in the diverse social attitudes that ranged from acceptance to extreme violence against khwaja siras. Understanding how khwaja siras were perceived in these contexts is a necessary step in illustrating the relationality between the public imaginary and khwaja sira identity politics.

In 2011, the US Embassy in Islamabad hosted a pride event, and issued a press release expressing its support for LGBT rights in Pakistan. This sparked anti-US and anti-gay protests in several Pakistani cities. Religious parties took to the streets in protest, condemning the event as a form of “cultural terrorism” and “an assault on Pakistan’s Islamic culture” by the US (Express Tribune). Meanwhile, fearing the worst, local gay and lesbian activists decided to lay low instead of participating in the public debate surrounding the event. Recent social movement literature indicates both the collaborative potential of transnational connections (Speed 2008) as well as their detrimental impacts. In this case, local queer activists viewed the Embassy’s action as an imperialist move that jeopardized their already meager efforts to organize.

Several months after the US Embassy pride event, a religious organization known as “Muslim Youth Forum” (MYF) launched a campaign against homosexuality by displaying anti-gay signage in Lahore. A banner hung at a busy city intersection stated that, “There is no place for *Gay* and *Lesbian* in Islam.” Another poster mentioned the US Embassy pride event, and called for the immediate dismissal of the representatives of “Gays and Lesbians in Foreign Affairs Agencies” (GLIFAA) and “Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network” (GLSEN) from Pakistan. In speaking to the press, a representative of MYF claimed that the two groups were actively recruiting individuals to join their organizations by offering them large sums of money (Kashif 2012). However, the fervor with which the program started seemed to dissipate soon after, and what became of the campaign is unclear.

Interestingly, khwaja siras were either unaware of or unfazed by the controversy surrounding this incident. In fact, even the protesting religious groups did not seem to view khwaja siras as a part of “LGBT.” This is not entirely surprising given that the local meanings of khwaja sira often did not translate into “transgender” in mainstream discourse. Further, unlike LGBT individuals, khwaja siras were typically not perceived as foreign imports but as an indigenous group with deep roots in South Asian history. The language that is used to identify minority groups has consequences for how they are perceived. Khwaja sira activists made a wise choice in appropriating the term khwaja sira since it spared them from the negative impacts of English terms, such as LGBT and transgender. Although, transgender was the preferred English term used by GSS and sexual health NGOs, it was mostly employed within activist contexts or in select forums rather than in public khwaja sira advocacy. Despite its limitations, “khwaja sira” was a safe and respectable word that promoted the security of gender ambiguous people and protected them from the harmful effects of social stigma.

With the exception of a few select NGOs, such as MHS, the employees of most sexual health organizations in Pakistan were unaccepting of the MSM and TG populations for whom they claimed to provide services. NGO employees adhered to dominant religious and social beliefs in spite of receiving extensive “sensitization” training. For instance, Ameer, who worked for a sexual health NGO and was the only heterosexual man in GSS’s core membership, believed that most khwaja siras suffered from a “psycho-sexual disorder.”

I think that if we carefully listen to their problems, manage their psychological hurdles, give them proper counseling, and if they are given more options and those options are facilitated, then they will change their ways. Plus, some khwaja siras are men who are either gay or bi. I’m talking about those who regularly like to fuck boys. I think that such individuals become khwaja siras because they are in need of money. They have found an easy way to earn by studying the khwaja sira community and penetrating it.

Ameer believed that gender dysphoria could be cured through psychotherapy, and that gender ambiguous people could function as men if they received proper treatment. Moreover, he echoed the dominant view that “normal” men joined khwaja sira networks in order to earn a livelihood. His views also reflect the popular belief within NGOs that most khwaja siras were homosexual.

Moreover, Ameer perceived gender in terms of a strict top-bottom oppositional binary, where the feminine partner should necessarily assume the passive/receptive sexual role. That a woman or a feminine person could possess the desire to penetrate a man was beyond Ameer’s cultural understanding. Hence, in line with the dominant view, he based gender identity solely on behavior instead of also considering desire as a crucial component of queer subjectivity. This understanding was derivative of widespread cultural and religious interpretations of sex/gender, which privileged physical constitution, bodily function, and behavior in determining gender. Hence, even NGO workers who sustained long-term contact with sexual minorities were often unable to comprehend the interplay between behavior and desire.

Similar views were prevalent within state institutions. For instance, the SC advocate,

Aslam Khaki, believed the condition of khwaja siras to be treatable disorder.

A male would never want to dress up as a woman and expose himself to the public. He would feel ashamed. But if he is doing this by choice, then he must have some psychological tendencies. Some people say that those who are psychological khwaja siras should be treated just the way you would treat a psychological problem. You do not submit to him and follow his wishes. The people who don't recognize psychological khwaja siras don't understand that they have a disorder and that they are patients. This is what I have been told by experts.

Khaki's views were informed by the opinions of medical practitioners and scholars with whom he had been in consultation for his SC case on khwaja siras. Although he accepted zennanas and hijras as khwaja siras, he was advised that such people could be fixed through psychotherapy and be made to function as "normal" men. The information from his sources appears to be based on dated and localized psychological studies of homosexuality and transgenderism.

Worse still was when NGO staff took a moralistic stance on issues pertaining to sex, gender and sexuality. During a visit to an NGO involved in HIV intervention in Karachi, I witnessed a revealing conversation between two NGO employees. Over tea, Khalid initiated a discussion about the corporeal practices of khwaja siras. He said that gender ambiguous people who altered their bodies tampered with God's creation, and that voluntary genital excision was tantamount to being at war with God. In agreement with Khalid, Arif stated that his professional involvement with khwaja siras was strictly on a humanitarian basis, as one human being helping another. However, his personal belief was that "TGs should not be encouraged by the government because what they are doing is wrong." Much like Khalid and Arif, many NGO workers in Pakistan were not above mainstream morality and respectability.

NGOs typically trained their staff to separate their personal opinions from their professional ones in order to prevent the former from interfering with service delivery to beneficiaries. However, the religious and cultural beliefs of NGO staff often intruded upon the

prescribed approach to the provision of services to clients. Some NGO employees attempted to change the behavior of sexual minorities through instruction on religiously unacceptable sexual acts (e.g., sex work, extramarital sex, and same-sex sexual behavior). These practices reflected prevailing attitudes towards gender ambiguous people and influenced how khwaja siras represented themselves to their NGO contacts.

### **Khwaja Siras and Ambiguity**

Founded on anatomy and biology, essentialist perspectives conjure a sense of certainty about gender. However, gender variant bodies destabilize this certitude and evoke ambivalence precisely because they are inscribed with ambiguity. Khwaja siras, by their mere presence, made sex/gender indistinct, while their deceptive representations reinforced the skepticism associated with their bodies. Together, the imprecise form and game-like strategies of khwaja siras distorted dominant notions of the contemporary forms of gender and sexual diversity in Pakistan. This section focuses on the Pakistani state's attempt to overcome the uncertainty presented by khwaja siras. It describes the impact of the strategic essentialisms deployed by activists on the government's attempt to monitor, categorize and organize khwaja siras.

### Somatechnics of Sex/Gender

The drive to normalize and regiment subversive bodies is among the responses to the destabilization of the normative sex/gender system. Here, I discuss the somatechnics of sex/gender devised by the state for the regulation and surveillance of genderqueer bodies. Somatechnics refers to the inextricable link between the body and the technologies, techniques and technics that shape embodiment (Pugliese and Stryker 2009, 1). It “evokes how bodies (soma) and technologies (specific discourses and social and cultural practices within disciplines

such as medicine, law, science and information technologies) form the basis of contemporary understandings of embodiment” (Mackenzie 2008, 398). These techniques include biopolitics or the state’s construction and control of citizens through the disciplinary technologies of power, which, according to Foucault, include such controls as confession, medical intervention, and public moral policing (1977; 1979).

Colonial rulers justified the registration, surveillance and control of hijras by categorizing them as a criminal caste under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (Reddy 2005, 26). After independence, the Pakistani government categorically ignored them, but in 2009 gender ambiguous people came under state scrutiny as a result of the rights granted to them by the SC. Although the attention they garnered fell under the rhetoric of rights rather than criminality, the techniques used by the Pakistani state to address the “mainstreaming” of khwaja siras resembled colonial methods of surveillance. This approach aims to divide target populations into taxonomic traits based on corporeal and behavioral classifications.

### Gender Verification

In 2009, Aslam Khaki filed a petition to the SC on behalf of khwaja siras. The case entailed a series of hearings that occurred over a span of three years, and during this time the Court passed several historic rulings in favor of khwaja siras. One of the most controversial decisions made by the Court was ordering NADRA, the government’s citizen identification and registration wing, to regulate khwaja siras by mandating a sex/gender verification test. The purpose of this examination was to medically determine the thirdness of those who claimed to be khwaja siras in order to ascertain their eligibility to register for third gender identity cards. The test was meant to measure the hormone levels of registrants (Redding 2014) presumably since hormonal imbalance



was believed to be indicative of genital irregularities. Such testing reflected the Court's essentialist understanding of "khwaja sira" as a biological category.

The announcement of the test created a stir among activists who feared that the invasive medical procedure would expose gender ambiguous people as "normal" men, thereby resulting in the termination of the rights granted to khwaja siras by the SC. "They are afraid of what will become of them if, after doing the checkup, the doctor declares that they're not khwaja sira," said Ameer, GSS's communications officer. Many others believed that the ID card debacle would lead to a government crackdown on khwaja siras and force them into hiding.

In order to prevent such a situation from arising, khwaja sira groups protested against the medical requirement. With guidance from women activists, GSS argued that the examination was discriminatory and flawed.

Everyone knows who they are and what is inside them, but no human has the right to tell another human what he or she is. But [NADRA]...gave us unnecessary tension by saying that they will do a medical test. A doctor will tell us what we are? Really? Well, then they should also check men and women. Why only khwaja siras? As for checking hormones, there are so many women whose [male] hormones levels are higher. Will the government call those women men? This is wrong.

GSS argued that hormone level testing was a defective method of determining thirdness.

Moreover, it was discriminatory since the exam was not mandated for ordinary men and women.

In the following SC hearing, the chief justice repealed the sex/gender verification requirement in light of the arguments set forth by khwaja sira activists. "It was decided that it is sufficient that they claim they are khwaja sira because...no individual will claim for themselves a title that is shameful in society," said Aslam Khaki, the lawyer who represented khwaja siras in the SC.

Thereafter, NADRA was ordered to register khwaja siras and to issue them ID cards without subjecting them to medical examination.

## The Perils of Taxonomic Regulation

The confusion surrounding the Supreme Court's organization of khwaja siras illustrates that gender variance is fundamentally intertwined with ambiguity. That non-normative genders and sexualities evoke uncertainty is not uncommon cross-culturally, and even in the South Asian subcontinent where they are revered as ascetics, hijras emanate ambiguity. The confusion surrounding the SC decisions pertaining to gender variant people elucidates the extent of the ambiguity encasing queer bodies and categories. This uncertainty not only plagued state institutions but also mystified khwaja sira leaders.

As mentioned earlier, in late 2011, the SC announced three khwaja sira sex/gender subcategories, namely, *mard*/male (khwaja sira), *'aorat*/female (khwaja sira) and khunsā-e-mushkil, and ordered NADRA to allow khwaja siras to select one of the three categories of their choice for their new identity cards.



**Figure 13.** A khwaja sira's national identity card indicating her "Sex" as "Male (khwaja sira)" in the red box above.

However, ordinary and activist khwaja siras found these three classifications bewildering, primarily because the SC did not define them. Activists were left on their own to interpret the meaning of the categories, which affirmed to many that the state viewed khwaja siras as

intersexuals. This was a logical assumption given that the SC first mandated a medical exam and subsequently espoused sex/gender categories that closely resembled the three Islamic classifications of intersexuality.

GSS leaders were unsure how to interpret the three categories when they were initially announced. Some interpreted male (khwaja sira) as zennana/akvā, female (khwaja sira) as hijra/nirbān, and khunsā-e-mushkil as intersexual. Others felt that both zennanas and hijras should register under the male (khwaja sira) subset because female (khwaja sira) was more appropriate for women who experienced gender/genital ambiguities. Alternatively, they realized that, in the absence of a medical exam, they could technically select any of the three subcategories of their choice irrespective of their somatic status. The following conversation between Sherry, Nighat and I demonstrates the disparate readings of the three khwaja sira classifications among constituents.

**Sherry:** A few day back, a khwaja sira asked me which category I selected for my new ID card. I said male (khwaja sira) because when we die, we are supposed to have the funeral of men. When we go for *Hajj* and '*Umrah* we have to go as men. But it was her wish to get registered as female (khwaja sira).

**Nighat:** Both akvās and nirbāns come under male (khwaja sira).

**Faris:** So who falls under female (khwaja sira)?

**Nighat:** Women who start getting facial hair, a beard and mustache.

**Faris:** What about khwaja siras who have gotten breasts? How will they do Hajj and 'Umrah in men's *ihram*<sup>99</sup>.

**Sherry:** Those who have silicon implants don't even think about doing Hajj and 'Umrah.

Despite their emasculated status, both Sherry and Nighat were drawn to the male (khwaja sira) category for religious reasons. Like most interlocutors, they believed that they should perform

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<sup>99</sup> The sacred dress of Muslim pilgrims. Men's *ihram* consists of two lengths of white cotton, one wrapped around the loins and the other draped over the left shoulder. Women can dress in any modest outfit as long as their head is covered but face and hands remain exposed.

the Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah as men since they were born male<sup>100</sup>. However, some khwaja siras wanted to register as female (khwaja sira) because a feminine identity was more appealing.

Even as khwaja sira activists self-interpreted the state-issued categories, they found themselves engulfed in uncertainty about their legal status. Soni's dubiousness about the government's stance on gender ambiguous people was evident in my conversation with her in January 2013.

**Faris:** What do male khwaja sira and female khwaja sira mean?

**Soni:** Male khwaja sira could include people like zennanas who are akvā or even those who are nirbān....

**Faris:** So then you're a male khwaja sira?

**Soni:** Exactly!

**Faris:** But do you think the SC's definition of male khwaja sira is the same as your definition of male khwaja sira?

**Soni:** Maybe.

The above discussion ended abruptly because Soni swiftly changed the topic when my line of questioning became disconcerting. Although she was quick to align herself with the male khwaja sira category in light of her non-emasculated status, she was uncertain if the state recognized her as such. Likewise, many gender ambiguous people suspected that they did not qualify as khwaja siras from the legal standpoint. Ironically, the ambiguity that gender variant individuals projected onto the wider society, now reflected back on them and produced uncertainty within their communities. Khwaja siras had unknowingly created a cycle of doubt, and they found themselves entrapped in a web of their own making.

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<sup>100</sup> Most khwaja siras were unaware that a change of sex on one's national identity card would not be accompanied by a corresponding adjustment on one's passport. Aslam Khaki explained that gender ambiguous people who select the female (khwaja sira) field on their ID cards would continue be listed as 'male' on their passports and accordingly perform pilgrimage as men. Khwaja siras would have to apply for Hajj visas either as men or women since the Saudi government did not recognize third sex/gender categories. The same would apply to the visa forms of countries that followed a binary sex/gender system.

The confusion experienced by community activists was a product of the state's own uncertainty, which reverberated into khwaja sira networks. During follow-up research in 2013, I finally had the opportunity to apprehend the state's legal definition of "khwaja sira" through a personal interview with Aslam Khaki in Islamabad. Khaki's testimony explains that the SC had been deliberately silent in defining "khwaja sira" partly due to its own misgivings. Khaki's personal experience with this case sheds light on his and the Court's initial presumption and emerging understanding of who khwaja siras really were, while also highlighting the process of knowledge production.

When I filed the petition in 2009, I had limited knowledge of khwaja siras. I used to think that khwaja siras are those who are unable to have children. But then many khwaja sira gurus started coming to me, people would bring literature from the Internet, and researchers like you came in contact with me and added to my knowledge drastically. That's how I came to know about these different classes. Initially, we were only talking about khwaja sira rights. Then gradually, newer issues came up when khwaja siras themselves started attending SC hearings. The big gurus started narrating their problems, and from that we learned new things and also started developing solutions.

Khaki's testimony elucidates the Court's uncertainty and evolving awareness of the communities to whom it was granting rights over the course of three years. Khaki started the court case under the erroneous assumption that khwaja siras were intersexuals and/or impotent. However, in consultation with a few khwaja sira leaders, researchers, and NGOs, he and the Court acquired new knowledge, which they used to devise rulings.

In this case, knowledge was produced and policies implemented through ordinary interactions. As is often the case, history is made not as a result of cascading macropolitical forces but by the everyday interactions and intervention of both influential and ordinary people. The events surrounding this case also demonstrate the Pakistani state's continual attempts "to gauge the demands upon it and to adjudicate on contentious issues" (Khan 2010, 25). Alternatively, the Court's deliberate silence over the meaning of its recently formulated

sex/gender categories was consistent with the contradictions and the general state of anxiety that have historically plagued Pakistan with respect to potentially controversial and religiously objectionable matters, particularly those related to gender and sexuality.



**Figure 14.** The anthropologist with a khwaja sira activist outside the Supreme Court in Islamabad. Community leaders from across the country attended one of the khwaja sira case hearings in late 2011.

To this end, my personal meeting with Khaki was significant because it shed light on the Court's eventual, though yet undeclared, stance on khwaja siras at the end of the three-year period of the case.

The SC court hasn't really defined the term khwaja sira. It has left it open...[A]ccording to the SC, khwaja sira includes both biological as well as psychological khwaja siras...Male (khwaja siras) are those in whom the male characteristics are dominant. This includes those who have masculine features. Their hands might be rough and tough, their facial expressions and the way they walk might be masculine, but they adopt the getup of females. Similarly, female (khwaja sira) are those in whom the female characteristics are dominant...Individuals who are physically female but psychologically male can also get a female (khwaja sira) card...And khunsā-e-mushkil means those who cannot be identified as either male or female. They are mixed. In Islamic law, a [urine] test has been prescribed to determine their sex. But back then they did not take notice of psychological khwaja siras. ...The term khwaja sira has an extensive and broad definition, which applies to anyone who we can call sexually abnormal in this culture.

According to Khaki, the state considers, in addition to intersexuals, those who experience gender dysphoria or possess a feminine soul as khwaja siras, regardless of corporeality. For the purpose of ID cards, the “male (khwaja sira)” category may be selected by masculine-looking zennanas, males who experience gender dysphoria, and intersexuals who urinate through the male genitals. The “female (khwaja sira)” category may be selected by feminine-looking zennanas, hijras, females who experience gender dysphoria, and intersexuals who urinate through the female genitals. Finally, “khunsā-e-mushkil” is appropriate only for intersexuals whose sex cannot be determined through the urination test. Curiously, Khaki suggests that the broad legal definition of “khwaja sira” could be extended to all non-normative sexualities, but he does not specify which ones.

However, due to the SC’s deliberate silence, most ordinary and activist khwaja siras were unaware of the state’s perspective on gender ambiguous people, which led many to experience insecurity about their legal status. Upon my return to Karachi, I promptly related the information I had gathered from Khaki to GSS members. Nonetheless, in the absence of an official explanation by the state, the gender ambiguous majority remained not only unclear about their rights but also vulnerable to injustices. Many continued to fear that the SC narrowly defined khwaja siras as intersexuals. “I think that if the SC found out that khwaja siras are not by birth, it might change its decision,” said Farah. “The truth cannot remain hidden for long, and it will become a huge scandal when it comes out.” Activist leaders were reluctant to make an issue of the state’s ill-definition of “khwaja sira” since a vague law was more amenable than a concrete one that excluded them altogether.

On the one hand, the confusion surrounding the Supreme Court’s decisions pertaining to gender variant people elucidate that judicial knowledge was produced and government policies

implemented not through certitude about khwaja siras, but by a process that entailed presupposition, perplexity and an emerging comprehension about sex/gender ambiguity. On the other hand, it was the presumptions of intersexuality that enabled the case to be taken up and entertained in the first place, and for the SC decisions to be passed without public protest.

## **Conclusion**

Strategic essentialisms have been both beneficial and detrimental to khwaja sira activism. The misconceptions and incoherence they perpetuated about khwaja siras encouraged a public discourse around khwaja sira rights in Pakistan and promoted the security of gender ambiguous people. These essentialisms worked precisely because khwaja siras have always evoked a sense of ambiguity in the wider society. This ambiguity is evident in the mixed perceptions about them in institutionalized domains. Conversely, essentialisms also injected uncertainty into the judiciary and the government, thereby hampering the state's efforts to classify and organize khwaja siras. The indeterminacy that activist leaders propagated about khwaja sira identities produced much confusion within state bodies. This sense of ambiguity unwittingly echoed back into khwaja sira social and activist networks, thus creating a cycle of incoherence surrounding genderqueer identities in Pakistan.



## **Chapter 8: Transnormativity and the Games and Khwaja Sira Activism**

Lisa Duggan describes homonormativity as “a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them” (2002, 179). In my appropriation of this perspective, I employ the derivative term, “transnormative,” to denote a political strategy that does not merely reproduce heteronormativity but social norms at large. Here, transnormativity describes a deceptive activist approach through which khwaja sira leaders fashioned a relatively “normal,” non-disruptive, and easily acceptable queer persona. In addition, they engaged in strategic maneuvers to control and manage information. The virtual identities they shaped through these techniques both converged with and diverged from actual khwaja sira identities. The foci of this chapter are activist strategies, particularly deceptive framing and the game-like social interactions of khwaja sira leaders in the public sphere. I claim that khwaja sira politics was mostly aimed at stifling public awareness of the corporeality and sexuality of gender ambiguous people. These games of secrecy and deception reproduced the uncertainty attached to queer bodies and subjectivity.

### **Framing Khwaja Siras**

David Snow and Robert Benford suggest that “the success of participant mobilization, both within and across movements, depends upon the degree to which” a movement is able to develop suitable frames (Snow 1988, 199). Framing refers to the “politics of signification,” of assigning meaning to and interpreting “relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents” (Snow 1988, 198). I appropriate the notion of “framing” as a strategy aimed not so much at gender variant constituents but mostly at raising public support for them.

Religious and cultural notions of morality and decency have played a role in shaping the legal and activist discourse around khwaja sira rights in Pakistan, which has revolved around making genderqueer people “decent citizens.” This reasoning emphasized the need to create job opportunities for khwaja siras in order to prevent them from leading an immoral life of begging, dancing and prostitution. In light of this discourse, the strategic framing of gender ambiguous people was vital to khwaja sira advocacy. Activist leaders wanted to change the public image of khwaja siras by dispelling select myths about them and by framing them as poor, deprived, moral, respectable, asexual, religious and responsible Pakistani citizens. This positive depiction was meant to garner the sympathy of the general public whether on TV, documentary films, newspapers or magazine articles. Although many of the prevailing ideas about gender variant people were simply untrue, others were not too far from reality. Regardless of their validity, khwaja sira activists contested stereotypes that were damaging to their reputation while upholding those that were beneficial.

In analyzing the history of transgender representation in film and television, Cael Keegan theorizes transnormativity as an approach to making gender non-normativity accessible to mainstream publics by representing genderqueer subjects as generic and desexualized characters that evoke sympathy and have a wide recognition and appeal (2013).

At base, these representations imply that transgender difference is ultimately resolvable--something that can be unproblematically folded into heteronormative familial and social structures through a democratic extension of progressive optimism and a re-stabilization of the gender binary. Transnormativity is therefore an expression of hegemonic cultural expansion, a sign of the enduring assimilative power of liberal democratic ideology and its gendered logics. (Keegan 2013)

Similar processes were at work in the framing strategies of khwaja sira activists. As part of what I view as its “transnormative agenda,” GSS’s media advocacy focused primarily on three broad themes, including: (1) the representation of gender ambiguous people as normal, respectable,

modern and capable, (2) khwaja siras as poverty stricken, and (3) the meaning of the term “khwaja sira.” This framing was meant to cover the “true, hidden, self” while presenting a “contrived self...for social recognition” (Dave 2011, 14).

### Transnormativity

GSS’s transnormative framing included separating the notion of sex and sexuality from the public discourse on khwaja siras. However, certain forces worked against the organization’s crusade of unhinging the linkages between gender ambiguous people and immorality. Among them was GSS’s former vice president, Farah, whose liberal views were poles apart from Payal’s conservative approach. While Payal wished to publically distance khwaja siras from socially unacceptable behavior, Farah was intent on asserting the rights of gender variant sex workers. “I told Farah, ‘When you were going abroad to a sex worker’s conference...I told you not go,’” said Payal. “‘But you didn’t listen to me. I curse upon your life for going there! You were GSS’s vice president! You had respect in society!’” Although Payal supported sex workers, she did not want her team to be publicly associated with it. Payal believed that the Pakistani public was not prepared for Farah’s progressive stance, and that they would judge her and GSS as bastions of sin for their defiant support of sex work. She wanted her team to be role models for khwaja siras and to show the Pakistani society that gender ambiguous people were capable of mainstream employment. However, Farah threatened to destabilize GSS’s framing of gender ambiguous people as respectable human beings, which was among the factors that eventually led to her expulsion from the organization.

Moreover, Payal lamented the damaging effects of HIV surveillance on the reputation of khwaja siras. In 2011, HIV research indicated that khwaja siras ranked second among the most at

risk groups for HIV/AIDS after injecting drug users. Payal was suspicious of these statistics and was dismayed by their widespread dissemination because they strained the already questionable status of khwaja siras in the mainstream. It was shameful enough that khwaja siras were blamed for tarnishing the moral fabric of society, but now they were also being held responsible for spreading a life threatening disease in the country. HIV research threatened to corroborate the popular belief that all khwaja siras were sinful people who engaged in immoral acts. As part of her activism, Payal was determined to change this negative portrayal.

### *Televisionary Advocacy*

Much like the “televisionary” approach of a Nicaraguan feminist NGO of normalizing local queer subjects (Howe 2001, 49-50), GSS occasionally collaborated with media outlets to disseminate its transnormative vision of khwaja siras to the public. The organization countered harmful myths through media advocacy, which entailed mimetic representations of middle-class domesticity, model citizenship, and moral rectitude. One of these myths was that gender ambiguous people bury their dead in their homes after midnight, which is a sacrilegious act according to Islamic funerary practices. In 2012, *Sare Aam*, an investigative television show on ARY, presented a special report on the urban legend pertaining to khwaja sira funerals in which several GSS members participated. The report begins by showing khwaja siras mourning the death of a family member in the front yard of a house. They cry, howl and embrace one another as melancholic music fills the scene. After the purification ritual, the corpse is laid out in the yard so that the mourners can take one last look at their deceased companion. The men in the neighborhood are then requested to shoulder the coffin to the cemetery. With the exception of

Maina and Maria, who attend the funeral procession dressed as men<sup>101</sup>, the remaining khwaja siras continue to mourn from home.

After receiving shariáh guidelines from a cleric over the phone, a man from the neighborhood leads the funeral prayer of the deceased. In this case, the rules pertaining to the funeral prayers of men are carried out. After the prayers, the corpse is carried to the graveyard where it is buried. The reporter emphasizes that all the rules for the burial of men were followed for this funeral, and his narrative throughout the show remains sympathetic.

What is the religion of khwaja siras? Like ordinary people, they too are the followers of different religions, and in Pakistan most of them are Muslim. The purpose of today's show was to raise the curtain off those secrets that have taken the shape of extremely incorrect stories.

The objective of this sympathetic portrayal of gender ambiguous people was to collapse the deleterious urban legend surrounding khwaja sira funerals, and to represent them as practicing Muslims. Crucially, the report busts this myth without disrupting the fable of intersexuality. The reporter emphasizes that the funerary rites mandated for a male were carried out, which could either be interpreted to mean that the deceased possessed male genitals or that he was an intersexual person whose genitals were closer in constitution to male sexual organs. Shariáh prescribes male funeral rites for the latter. Either way, the corporeal status of the deceased remains unclear. In a private conversation after the show had aired, Maria informed me that GSS had collaborated with ARY to stage the funeral shoot, and that the report was not the coverage of an actual death.

The discourse around the rights of khwaja siras also brought unwanted attention to their culture. Many outsiders saw the khwaja sira social structure as a system of exploitation where

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<sup>101</sup> In Pakistan, women do not generally follow funeral processions to the graveyard, and many believe that they are not permitted to do so.

gurus mistreated their students. This negative notion threatened to disrupt activist representations of gender ambiguous people as peaceful and respectable. When the guru-celā system came under the scrutiny of the public eye, GSS assumed responsibility of representing the ancient tradition in positive terms. The excerpt below is from the documentary shoot of *Transgenders: Pakistan's Open Secret* (2011), which GSS helped facilitate. As participants in the documentary, Payal and her family members took the lead in speaking on behalf of khwaja siras. The following exchange between the filmmaker and Payal preceded the filming of an induction ritual in which Payal initiated Hasi as her celā. Traditionally, the initiation ceremony was a sacred rite of passage that outsiders were not allowed to attend. However, in recent years, community activists had become increasingly open to providing public visibility to their customs in order to dispel damaging stereotypes about gender ambiguous people. Portraying themselves as harmless was far more important than maintaining ritual secrecy.

**Filmmaker:** What was this ritual all about?

**Payal:** Khwaja siras don't have children of their own. So, when someone willingly wants to become our student, we have this ritual as a kind of celebration...Gurus and celās have a parent-child relationship. Celās respect their gurus, and gurus treat them like their children.

**Filmmaker:** What happens when celās disobey?

**Payal:** They are fined. The fine helps to make sure they do not repeat their mistakes...

**Filmmaker:** How much does a celā have to give to a guru from her earnings?

**Payal:** ...See, if I'm ever in need of money, I can always go to my celā for help...[and] if a celā needs help or falls sick, then the guru goes to her aid...

The filmmaker poses a number of pointed questions that presume the khwaja sira system to be exploitative, but Payal carefully answers each question, painting a positive picture of the guru-celā bond. Payal accurately depicts the khwaja sira social structure as an alternative kinship system without addressing the tensions characteristic of its core social relationship. Instead, she compares the mentor-student bond to a paternal relationship while perpetuating the myth of khwaja sira childlessness.

Despite GSS's best efforts, however, the released version of the documentary describes the guru-celā system as a form of modern-day slavery. Although the documentary provides a sympathetic portrayal of gender ambiguous people, it demonizes the guru-celā system on which their culture stands. Gurus are depicted taking advantage of celās, and of taking away their hard earned incomes. Moreover, the narrator repeatedly employs the vocabulary of slavery; she describes celās as the “property” of gurus, draws on the terms of ownership (e.g., buying, selling), and refers to the transfer of a disciple from one mentor to another as a form of sale. The film gives the impression that celās are nothing more than indebted slaves who are fined and persecuted by their mentors. The narrator asserts her authority, insisting upon a grim etic interpretation of the guru-celā system. Although fines and punishments are a staple of any society, the general public routinely censured khwaja siras for imposing them on one another. It was precisely such an insidious portrayal of khwaja siras that GSS aimed to counter.

GSS leaders represented khwaja siras as “normal” people whose everyday lives were similar to the experiences of ordinary men and women. In the following extract from her interview on the Sahir Lodhi Show (2008), Payal highlights her sameness with ordinary people.

I live with my family. My family cooperates with me fully...They never differentiate between me and themselves...Some khwaja siras loose touch with their families but this is no different from how in ordinary families siblings fight with each other or a brother starts living separately. It's the same with us...Everyone in my neighborhood calls me *baji* (sister), and I have always thought of my neighbors as my own.

Payal portrays khwaja siras as ordinary people by misrepresenting herself as someone with close links with her biological family. She likens the estrangement between gender ambiguous people and their families to disputes that occur between siblings in normative households. That everyone in her neighborhood affectionately addressed her as “sister” is meant to suggest that they treated her with respect instead of discriminating against her on the basis of her difference.

Through her media advocacy, Payal sought to make khwaja siras approachable to the public. She emphasized through her personal experiences, however mendacious, that gender ambiguous people could coexist with “normal” people.

GSS’s media campaign, which was geared towards articulating a world where khwaja siras could be equal constituents of the wider society, relied on depicting them doing “normal” things. One of the ways in which GSS circulated a normative image of gender ambiguous people was by collaborating with local TV channels that were interested in covering khwaja sira’s celebrating Eīd. In these programs, Payal’s khwaja sira kin were presented observing Eīd no differently than other Pakistanis, that is, by spending time with family and friends. However, there was a stark divergence between these virtual representations and how most gender ambiguous people actually spent Eīd. In reality, many khwaja siras, including some members of GSS, devoted this religious holiday to begging, especially since it was one of their most lucrative earning days. However, in media encounters, community activists reinforced the illusion of normalcy in hopes that the wider society would cease to see them as social anomalies. They wanted to be perceived as normal beings, and they believed that transnormative performances would “make them perceptible” to their audiences (Puri 2009, 51). Demonstrating compliance with social norms, this politics of sameness was meant to foster a sense of relatability with khwaja siras. In other words, community activists engaged in the “careful management of difference” one that Jasbir Puar describes as a “difference within sameness” and a “difference containing sameness” (2007, 25).

### *Social Media*



Payal had discovered the power of photographs through her experience of working with NGOs and media outlets. She had witnessed both sectors benefitting by manipulating reality through images. Payal learned to play this game of deception by observing other professionals, and by putting her own spin on it, she hoped that GSS too could someday reap the rewards of fabricated photography. She wanted photographic evidence to serve as a public testament to the capabilities of khwaja siras. Moreover, she wanted to showcase GSS's diligent engagement in constructive work in the eyes of state agencies who she naively hoped would offer to extend their assistance to keep her floundering organization afloat.

Incidentally, I became a crucial part of GSS's photography and social media campaign since I provided the resources that made it possible. Through me, Payal gained easy access to the Internet and a digital camera. This enabled the organization to launch a media campaign that gave it the power of self-representation instead of having to depend solely on the intervention of established media outlets that were not only less available but also could not always be relied on to positively represent khwaja siras. During fieldwork, I accompanied Payal to NGOs, government offices, khwaja sira conflict resolution meetings, rituals, social gatherings, out of town visits, television shoots, etc. I visually documented each event both for my own research and for GSS, and posted relevant photos to the group's Facebook page under Payal's supervision. Payal handpicked the photos, specified which ones to omit, and dictated accompanying captions. Even though these tasks seem mundane, the kind of information I was asked to post and omit was valuable in enhancing my understanding of GSS's "framing" of khwaja siras. My own involvement in these illusive acts was limited to trying to grasp the meaning and full range of the games khwaja siras played with the general public while carrying out the duties that were assigned to me.

Many of GSS's representations were misleading if not entirely orchestrated. Payal often utilized khwaja sira cultural gatherings as sites to engage in or to stage her advocacy campaign. For instance, she conducted an HIV awareness session after her great granddaughter's transfer ritual. A couple of condoms, GSS's banner, a camera and an audience of twenty or so khwaja siras was all she needed. Nadia hung the organization's banner in clear view of my camera, and Payal asked me to film and then post the session on GSS's YouTube channel. Even though it was a staged event, it gave Payal the opportunity to impart safe sex practices to her extended family members while demonstrating GSS's capabilities and civic engagement.



**Figure 15.** Khwaja siras protesting against terrorism and violence outside the Karachi Press Club.

Besides promoting GSS, Payal harnessed the power of photographs to positively represent khwaja siras. During a visit to Hyderabad (a city in the Sindh province of Pakistan) for her student's post-emasculation ceremony, I accompanied Payal and a few other khwaja siras to a Hindu temple, where her newly nirbān disciple, Anjali, a practicing Hindu, wanted to make offerings to a deity. Payal made me document the excursion, and upon our return to Karachi, had me publish photos on Facebook with the following caption:

Payal met with a group of khwaja siras living in Hyderabad who are from the Hindu community. She and Nadia crossed the River Indus by boat with them in order to get to

the temple, which was located on the other side of the river. At the temple, the Hindu khwaja siras prayed for the country and its citizens.

Needless to say, Payal deliberately omitted mentioning Anjali's recent emasculation and its connection to the temple visit. She misled the online audience into thinking that the purpose of the trip was to pray for "the country and its citizens." In reality, Anjali prayed for her good health and quick recovery from the life-altering surgery. Payal inserted khwaja siras into the narrative of the nation-state by depicting them as responsible Pakistanis who cared for the country and its citizens even though they were excluded from mainstream society. Hence, GSS's depiction of gender ambiguous people put a positive spin on situations while masking their complicity in socially unacceptable practices. The ground reality of the stigmatizing activities that khwaja siras performed simmered under the thin veneer of these deceptive images.

My examination of GSS's deceptive representations raises critical questions about the ethics of analyzing information that informants wished to keep secret. Here, it would be expedient to mention that GSS's framing shifted contextually, particularly in keeping with the platform it used for public advocacy (e.g., television, social media, English or Urdu language publications, NGOs, meetings with government officials) and with respect to the corresponding audience in each case. Activists either highlighted or concocted information depending on what was situationally safe, beneficial or convenient. Accordingly, divulging clandestine knowledge in certain venues was considered safe, especially where the audience was foreign or considered to be liberal. For instance, GSS activists were unopposed to exposing the corporeality and sexuality of khwaja siras in interviews for foreign documentaries. In fact, GSS facilitated the shoot of a British film that chronicled the livelihood practices of a khwaja sira sex worker. I take into account GSS's context-dependent representations in writing this dissertation, which is meant primarily for North American and English-speaking academic audiences, who, in the

aforementioned instances, were not the targets of GSS's identity politics. I have also maintained the anonymity of GSS activists in order to prevent feelings of embarrassment that might otherwise occur from my writing.

### *Morality and Respectability*

Allah has granted us so much respect now. We have worked so hard to achieve it, so we shouldn't let it go to waste. (Payal)

Here, Payal underscores the significance of maintaining respect (izzat) in light of the rights granted to khwaja siras by the Pakistani state. Maintaining social respectability had become far more important to khwaja siras since receiving legal recognition. Gender ambiguous citizens had experienced a slight improvement in status that they did not wish to forgo, which in turn required taking necessary steps to maintain the illusion of respectability.

In the following example activist leaders deploy virtual identities while attempting to control how third parties represented them. It demonstrates how social norms pertaining to sexual propriety influenced their politics despite efforts to separate morality from activism and development. Previous efforts to promote safe-sex practices through various media failed in large measure because HIV/ AIDS-related messages did not clearly explain how the infection spreads. For example, posters attempted to communicate ideas about virus transmission through the idiom of morality. Instead of stating explicitly how the infection circulated, posters warned against leading an "immoral and unnatural lifestyle" and encouraged people to "use caution," "observe the Islamic lifestyle," and "protect our country from this shame" (Khan and Khilji 2002, 15). Informed by the failures of earlier HIV programs, some NGOs attempted to expunge moralistic views from their intervention efforts. This example also provides an avenue for

marginal voices to be expressed (Leap 2002, 142), and enables a careful listening and analysis of queer negotiations.

In late 2011, Payal and I, along with two other GSS representatives, attended a workshop hosted by MHS in Islamabad. Various NGO and CBO partners from across the country were invited to share their experience of working with marginalized communities. This was a sizable gathering consisting of khwaja sira, gay, and HIV/AIDS activists and NGO workers. One of the sessions focused on the impact of social conditioning on the well-being of MSM and transgender populations. A close analysis of this session provides useful insights into both the effects of transnationalization and the identity politics of khwaja siras.

The moderator of the session, Saif, a tall and lanky man, was dressed in skinny jeans and a fitted top paired with leather boots. He stood before the participants with one hand on his hip. He held a marker in his other hand, which was supported by a limp wrist. With a slight lisp, Saif asked, “What is normal?” Met with silence, he rephrased his question: “What does the general public consider normal? A girlish boy or one who is completely like a boy?” Finally, a khwaja sira responded by saying that a person who was physically and behaviorally a man or a woman was considered normal according to Islam and Pakistani culture. In agreement, Saif stated that society determined what was and was not normal, even though in reality all individuals were normal in and of themselves. Next, Aisha, a hijab-clad woman doctor, stated that it was the job of medical professionals to determine whether or not a person was normal or sick. In response, Saif described the role of science in determining normality and abnormality, noting that scientific knowledge differed across time and space.

Back in the day, psychology manuals used to say that homosexuality and transsexuality were abnormal, but then scientists realized that they were wrong. Today, transgender people are not considered abnormal in the US...But here, even now our medical books

say that it is abnormal. Perhaps people in the West are more broadminded...Who a person sleeps with in their bedroom should not concern us. That is between them.

When an NGO worker reacted strongly to Saif's comment by asserting that sexual encounters between men were abnormal, the khwaja sira participants applauded the man's remark. Aisha echoed the NGO worker's response by declaring same-sex sexual behavior to be immoral. Again, the khwaja sira attendees applauded enthusiastically.

Saif's objective was to challenge the participants' preconceived ideas about normal and abnormal, to highlight that each society defined normalcy differently, and to clarify that those who were deemed "abnormal" had fewer rights. He emphasized that every person was normal and had equal human rights, including the right to health, regardless of their sexuality. Saif's agenda was to transform his audience into critical thinkers who were capable of emancipation from sociocultural restrictions. This form of capacity building was a vital component of HIV intervention through which individuals from marginalized groups were transformed into community leaders and avid activists.

Unfortunately, the exercise was a failure, and heated arguments broke out between the moderator and the participants who perceived Saif's radical statements as an affront to religious and social norms. To them, Saif encompassed unbridled modernity with his radical views, effeminacy, and "Western" clothes. For instance, in describing cross-cultural and temporal differences in medical information, Saif privileged knowledge originating from the West. Moreover, he advocated beliefs and practices that were considered immoral and sinful, or the antithesis of being Muslim and Pakistani. Consequently, the participants openly resisted what they were being taught because they felt their cultural views were under attack by a "sellout."

The khwaja sira trainees reacted to the discussion by expressing support for those who spoke against same-sex sexual behavior. By applauding their remarks, the khwaja sira activists

distanced themselves from men who have sex with men, a view enhanced by their new legal status as a third sex distinct from male and female. By this logic, their sexual encounters with men did not fall under the category of same-sex sexual behavior.

Later in the session, Beena, a khwaja sira activist, reacted strongly when Saif started explaining the sexual practices of khwaja siras. When she urged him to stop focusing on the “vices” of khwaja siras, Saif suggested that she reconsider her perception of sex work as a vice.

**Beena:** Please stop talking about our vices!

**Saif:** Beena, we cannot call it a vice.

**Beena:** *You* don’t have to call it a sin if you don’t want to, but *I* think it is a sin. Even though some khwaja siras engage in sex work, we ourselves are against it and we declare that this is wrong! Wrong! Wrong!

The audience clapped in support of Beena, and the fervor of the participants grew as Aisha went over to embrace her.

**Saif:** Beena considers sex work to be a bad thing, but not everyone thinks that way.

**Beena:** I was talking about us khwaja siras—we think it is bad!

**Aisha:** Beena is right! A vice is a vice no matter what!

Saif wanted to use this opportunity to underscore his argument that culture and society determined propriety and impropriety, and that sex work should not be considered a vice merely because people were conditioned to believe that it was wrong. Nonetheless, Beena upheld her views by defiantly declaring sex work to be a sin.

Beena’s strong statement against sex work contradicted her behavior when she was in the company of gender ambiguous people. Earlier that day I had overheard her telling a group of khwaja siras that one of her students—also a workshop attendee—had been covertly engaging in sex work with a male participant at the training. Beena was excitedly giving her listeners a graphic description of her student’s sexual encounter. I wondered why someone whose own

disciples engaged in sex work and who took great pleasure in talking about sex would vehemently oppose both during the training.

Beena's aggressive stance against the moderator's remarks made sense given the presence of normatively gendered people at the workshop, some of whom had already expressed their condemnation of non-heteronormative sexual behavior. That the discussion kept focusing on the sexual behavior of gender variant people agitated a number of khwaja sira activists who were uncomfortable that these issues were being discussed in the presence of outsiders. They were afraid that the moderator would damage the reputation of khwaja siras by exposing the particulars of their lives. Beena's strong reaction speaks to the identity politics of khwaja siras, which hinged on maintaining a public image of respectability.

This situation was further complicated by the fact that most khwaja siras considered themselves to be sinners and viewed their lifestyle to be in conflict with Islam. In other words, Beena's proclamation about sex work being a sin paralleled the khwaja sira belief that they were sinners due to their involvement in socially and religiously prohibited behavior. However, they also believed that they were helpless due to their feminine soul, which allowed them to be attracted only to men. That the khwaja sira trainees resisted the moderator's acceptance of their sexualized lifestyle reveals the paradox of their lives, highlighting their internal conflict between their desire for a lover and their involvement in sex work, on the one hand, and their conviction that having a lover and engaging in sex work were immoral and prohibited in Islam, on the other.

Khwaja siras neither resisted behavior that was socially unacceptable nor advocated for it to be legally sanctioned. Instead, they conceal their involvement in such activities and engaged in a public representation of khwaja siras as good Muslims and responsible Pakistani citizens. For instance, during the training, Beena felt compelled to represent khwaja siras as decent members



of society when Saif began discussing the sexual behavior of gender variant people, including the fact that they had functional sexual organs.

Not all of them are like that! There are many who have never in their life had an erection. You shouldn't talk about something you don't know. I want to clarify that there are many categories of khwaja siras... There are some who are like males, they have a penis but no testicles. There are some who have testicles but no penis. There are some who are like women from below and like men on top. Please don't describe it as just one thing....[and please] don't think that we khwaja siras want that someone should have sex with us. There are so many hijras who have never done it with men. You shouldn't talk about something you don't know. Our big households where our elders live are locked up at dusk . . . and no stranger can enter their home. Many of them have been to Mecca for holy pilgrimage, and Allah's grace is upon us since we can bless people. Some of our khwaja siras even veil their faces and go out in burkas. My point is that if one woman is a character that doesn't mean everyone is like that.

Beena emphasized conservatism, asexuality and intersexuality among khwaja sira elders and urged the moderator not to misrepresent gender ambiguous people by focusing exclusively on those who engaged in "sin."

At the workshop, this maneuver was exercised in response to the negative remarks of the non-queer participants against same-sex sexual behavior. The khwaja sira trainees aligned themselves with these "respectable" people and spoke out against the moderator, who was clearly in favor of their sexualized lifestyle. They thought that the moderator was doing them a disservice by exposing their clandestine sexual life. They countered his claims by depicting khwaja siras as religious and moral, even though they engaged in socially objectionable behavior in their private lives.

The question of "[w]ho has the right to speak for whom?" (Kennedy 2002, 100) becomes relevant when those who have privileged access to participation assume authority in representing sexual minorities. Those who do not acquire fluency and proficiency in the codes crucial to activism are unable to represent themselves and assume positions of authority and prestige (Leap and Boellstorff 2004, 3). Being represented by outsiders was disconcerting for khwaja sira

activists, especially in situations where they were present to speak for themselves. They had much to hide from the public, and they felt that NGO officials who assumed the responsibility of speaking on their behalf, risked exposing their well-kept secrets to potentially unpredictable audiences. The elite NGO employees did not share the concerns of khwaja siras about their safety and reputation. Moreover, they did not possess the unique set of skills (i.e., hijraness) required to tactfully represent gender ambiguous people as respectable and moral<sup>102</sup>. It was disempowering for khwaja siras to lose their voice and the ability to self-represent, which is why they were aggressive in making themselves heard.

During the workshop, Payal explained why Beena and other activists reacted strongly to Saif's account of khwaja sira corporeality and sexual practices. "When someone interferes in our personal affairs, we get irritated," she said. Payal's statement affirmed the overall attitude of the khwaja sira participants towards Saif who took a lead in talking about them. Saif's "indiscretion" in revealing truths in the presence of respectable worldly people prompted Beena to intervene and control the portrayal of khwaja siras. The discussions that transpired at the workshop reveal the propensity of khwaja sira activists to maintain a positive image of their communities in an effort to gain social respectability.

### *Modernity and Image Transformation*

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<sup>102</sup> Although I do not deny my collusion in discussing the sexual and corporeal aspects of khwaja siras' lives, I am vested in and have the opportunity of presenting a holistic picture of their cultural beliefs and practices in a manner that is aimed at generating a humanistic understanding of this marginalized population. I also have an informed awareness of the contexts and audiences before whom khwaja siras would exercise caution, and where and before whom they would prefer to speak for themselves. Within the context of my writing, I have no qualms with taking a lead in representing gender ambiguous people since a large majority of my readership is directly inaccessible to them, allowing me to avoid interfering with their politics with regards to audiences that matter to khwaja siras.

Another transnormative virtual identity deployed by activists was the modern khwaja sira. As a marginalized population, gender ambiguous people experienced multiple streams of stigma due to their non-normativity and association with “vice.” In addition, their exclusion from mainstream society was augmented by their lack of educational skills and inability to be gainfully employed. GSS members were cognizant of their incapability to effectively run an NGO in the absence of basic qualifications. Funding and travel opportunities were regularly awarded to a competing organization by the name of Murat Collective (MC), whose educated members hailed from a higher-class background. GSS strove to compensate for its inadequacies in other, more easily achievable ways, particularly through the consumption and performance of modernity.

Payal was determined to transform the image of her organization and to represent its members as modern subjects. To this end, she placed the most qualified and modern-looking khwaja siras she could find in leadership positions. Unfortunately, even her most competent candidates were not qualified enough. Moreover, this approach led her to mismanage human resources within GSS by impelling khwaja siras with little interest or competence in activism into leadership positions simply based on their appearance.

Most gender ambiguous people, especially those who were visible in the public sphere, came from lower class backgrounds, and their class location contributed to their portrayal as unrefined people. Woefully aware of their own lower-classness, GSS activists aspired to represent themselves as a collective of educated, progressive and respectable khwaja siras who were not only distinct from ordinary gender ambiguous people but were also a model for them to follow. One way of achieving this objective was by appropriating modern middle-class

femininity. Adopting this look was an attempt at fashioning a transnormative aesthetic through which community activists produced a relatively “normal” and acceptable khwaja sira persona.

In recent times, a shift in tastes had occurred among urban gender ambiguous people who aspired to appear more like women and less like khwaja siras. Instead of appropriating the distinct hijra clap, a high-pitched voice and garish makeup, some gender ambiguous people had started using lighter makeup and less gaudy outfits, which were associated with respectable and middle-class femininity and modernity. GSS members adopted this sartorial aesthetic, not only as means of achieving class mobility and urban sophistication, but also to establish distance from the traditional hyper sexual khwaja sira look. GSS members wanted to “pass” as decent and modern as opposed to uncivil, immoral and sexualized.

In 2011, GSS’s executive committee consisted of Payal, Shani, Shazia, Maina and Nadia. Nadia was the latest addition to the group. However, Payal began to regret her decision of instating Nadia soon after she took her post. One afternoon at GSS’s office, Payal started blaming Nadia for ruining GSS’s reputation. Over the past week, a local television channel had invited GSS to participate in a weeklong talk show series based on the theme of weddings. The GSS team attended the first four days of the televised series, however, their invitation was mysteriously rescinded for the remaining days of the shoot. Payal was convinced that Nadia’s indecorous behavior had led to their exclusion from the show. “It’s because she dances so wildly and flaps her scarf all over the place,” she said. Maina, who was present at the scene, added that Nadia’s inability to adopt a simple urban aesthetic had marred GSS’s social standing.

These big people do not like such behavior. When I go out to beg, I go exactly as I am dressed right now in these simple clothes without any makeup. The homes that I go to, and the people who I meet, they ask me why other khwaja siras aren’t like me.

According to Maina, “respectable” people preferred simplicity over excessive ornamentation and exaggerated femininity, which were linked to vulgarity and coarseness. In effect, this was a question of morality, which Pandian suggests is aligned with culture, civility and modernity, and cast in opposition to the immorality characteristic of nature, savagery and backwardness (2009).

Undoubtedly, Nadia stood out from the rest of the group because of her social background. Even though the majority of GSS activists belonged to a lower socioeconomic strata, they had managed to improve their standing by mimicking a contemporary urban appearance. Nadia, however, was the exception. Although, Maina, Shazia and Shani had the distinct advantage of being more educated, the illiterate Payal had succeeded in aligning herself with them by appropriating their aesthetic. In contrast, Nadia, who was more educated than Payal, lacked this modern metropolitan sensibility since she had retained close links to her natal village and was unable to distance herself from her rural mentality.

Several weeks later, Payal decided to address her concerns during the organization’s executive committee meeting. She emphasized the need to revamp GSS’s image and urged the core members to improve their style. Payal offered Nadia a probationary six-months period to undergo a complete makeover, and highlighted what needed overhauling.

You've done a complete beggar *getup*, a khusrah *getup*. Your clothes are too bright. We want you to wear sober and decent clothes. Don't wear deep collars. Wear clothes with a higher neckline so that you don't look too vulgar. Don't wear excessive jewelry. See, on one wrist you have these two traditional bangles and on top of that you're wearing these modern bangles. The modern bangles look really good, but lose those awful bangles. They make you look like a village woman. And you must focus on how you walk and talk. Don't spread your legs so widely when you sit down. Be civil. Be nice.

Nadia reluctantly acquiesced to the advice and promised to make a dedicated effort to change her appearance. This kind of transnormativity calls attention to the “logic and politics whereby minoritarian subjects are...domesticated...as ‘good citizens’ of the...state” (Bryant 2008, 456).

In neighboring India, scholars have described similar accounts of exclusion and institutionalized phobia of certain behaviors within activist contexts that diverged from normative notions of decorum (Hall 2005, Reddy 2004; Shahani 2008). Likewise, the policing of non-normative bodies within GSS operated on the premise of dignified difference. It was through such taming that khwaja sira activists attempted to publically embody moral, normal, and socially responsible gender ambiguous citizens.

Besides sartoriality, GSS members performed modernity in a number of other ways. Shazia, for instance, took private English lessons and employed her limited vocabulary of English words in interactions with “respectable” outsiders. Shazia managed to carry herself with the poise of upper and middle class women with whom she interacted in her professional capacity. Payal instructed the rest of the GSS team to take a lead from Shazia in their efforts of self-transformation. She also wanted everyone to acquire basic English speaking skills. “If you speak with someone in English, they immediately pay attention to you,” she said.

In addition, the GSS team wanted to improve other aspects of their lives. When I first met Payal, she was living in a slum next to an open sewage channel, and she desperately wanted to move to a “respectable” neighborhood where she would not feel embarrassed to invite media *vālās* and other important people. Payal also urged Nadia to move out of her squalid residence. She despised the entrance to Nadia’s colony, which was partially blocked by a gargantuan garbage dump that visitors had to traverse in order to reach her house. As a new member of GSS, Nadia was expected to make necessary lifestyle changes to reflect her new and improved status. It was critical that GSS activists showed the public that they were prosperous in life and that khwaja siras were capable of more than simply begging, dancing and prostitution.

As public figures who were frequently in the limelight, activist leaders were under immense pressure to exemplify model khwaja sira citizenship despite their involvement in stigmatizing activities, such as begging and sex work. A public revelation of ties to prostitution would have made them vulnerable to legal action, and to persecution and violence from conservative vigilante groups. Consequently, they took precautionary measures to mask their involvement in “vice” in order to avoid jeopardizing their newfound social status.

### Image of Deprivation

Although GSS leaders represented themselves as modern and accomplished individuals, they maintained an image of deprivation for ordinary khwaja siras in order to evoke sympathy for them in mainstream society. Emotions play an important role in social movements because they can be strategically evoked to accomplish organizational objectives (Goodwin, Jasper and Polletta 2001, 9), such as garnering public support. The virtual image of the impoverished khwaja sira served this purpose.

When I initially met Shani, she told me that “[k]hwaja siras are very poor... There are days when they aren’t even called for dance functions, and when they do, it’s like Eīd for them.” I believed Shani. Her statement matched my own perception of gender ambiguous people, and it seemed reasonable since it justified the prevalence of khwaja sira beggars. But several months into fieldwork, I was perplexed to learn that the average khwaja sira earned between Rs. 20,000-30,000 (approx. \$229-343) a month.

GSS’s deceptive politics eventually became evident one afternoon when MHS hosted an Eīd party in collaboration with GSS. The event was held at a hotel in Karachi, and among those invited were ordinary khwaja siras and representatives of the Sindh AIDS Control Program.

During the dancing portion of the event, the khwaja sira guests began engaging in tamāshbenī, the act of dropping cash on dancers<sup>103</sup>. The practice was a symbol of prestige both for the giver and the receiver, and it was also a way for khwaja siras to reciprocate with one another. When the khwaja siras at the party began dropping big rupee bills on the performers, Payal sprinted over and advised them that NGO events were not appropriate venues for tamāshbenī. However, when they refused to comply, Payal felt compelled to take the podium to explain the function of the practice to the NGO workers and government officials in the audience. She decided to use the opportunity as a teachable moment by describing the custom as a traditional form of reciprocity between khwaja siras. She emphasized that the practice was not a waste of money, and that the recipients were very much in need of it. Later, when I asked Payal why she felt obliged to justify the custom, she said that she did not want the guests thinking that khwaja siras had money to squander. Although tamāshbenī was a reciprocal practice, Payal eschewed disclosing that it was often motivated by the giver's desire to flaunt his/her affluence and to outshine others.

That khwaja siras were not poverty stricken must be tempered with the knowledge that their entry into sex work was motivated by poverty. Although they enjoyed high earnings by selling sex, most were extremely poor when they initially joined the field. Moreover, discontinuing one's involvement in the profession was difficult given its profitability. Payal was determined to cover from the public khwaja sira's high incomes while highlighting the relative modernity and success of the GSS team.

Younger middle-class activists were frustrated with Payal's portrayal of gender ambiguous people as pathetic and distressed. "Payal...only says things that make people feel

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<sup>103</sup> This was a customary practice at khwaja sira cultural events where solo dancers were given money by male admirers and their khwaja sira family and friends.



sorry for *transgenders*,” said Mehreen. “Yes, the things that happen to us are terrible, but transgenders do not need sympathy. We only want our rights!” Mehreen was less attuned to represent gender ambiguous people as poor since the class of “transgenders” she represented were more educated and enjoyed easier access to mainstream opportunities. For Payal, however, perpetuating the discourse of the poverty-stricken khwaja sira was strategically advantageous. In situations where opponents charged gender ambiguous people for spreading social ills, Payal retorted by blaming the wider society for precluding them from respectable work, thereby forcing them to sell their bodies for survival. This is an instance of “how non-normative subjectivities entangle with dominant discourses,” and the “processes by which inequality is challenged through forms of reverse discourse” (Boellstorff 2007, 23). Although exclusion from mainstream opportunities was a valid concern, Payal’s defense for the involvement of khwaja siras in prostitution relied on misrepresenting them as destitute.

The right to charity and welfare were among the benefits granted to khwaja siras by the state. Under the new policies, gender ambiguous people could claim monthly support from the *Zakāt*<sup>104</sup> Fund and the Benazir Income Support Programme, which were meant for populations living below the poverty line. Below, Payal explains the importance of these rights.

*Māshaāllah*, we earn enough that we don’t need financial assistance. We don’t need zakāt so much that each month we should have to go get Rs. 500 from the Zakāt Committee. Why would a khwaja sira who lives in one corner of the city spend Rs. 250 to get there and then Rs. 250 to get back home? He will say, to hell with it. I’d rather just ask people for money in my own neighborhood and make that much in two hours. But we don’t want to forgo of these things because we want the same rights as common men and women. Besides, there might be a khwaja sira who is very poor, who does not beg, who might want to take the bus to get zakāt.

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<sup>104</sup> The Islamic practice of charitable giving based on accumulated wealth.

Payal highlights that government welfare was not substantial enough to be worthwhile for khwaja siras. Nonetheless, activists were unwilling to relinquish the right to welfare on the principle of equality for all citizens, including khwaja siras.

### Opposition and Control

Oftentimes, activists deployed virtual identities in their struggle for control over the meaning of khwaja sira. The goal of activism is to promote awareness and to provide alternative perspectives that counter conventional thinking concerning issues of import. Although khwaja sira activists regularly engaged with the public, their efforts cannot be categorized as a form of counter-public or “counter-hegemony” (Crehan 2002), which can be defined as non-hegemonic discourse, thought or action. Even as they struggled to control what it meant to be a khwaja sira, they took a lead from popular logic and worked within the dominant order rather than against it. Khwaja sira activists did not always counter public opinion, but reproduced it when it was individually and communally beneficial.

I highlighted earlier that not all genderqueer people identified with the term “khwaja sira.” The following online encounter demonstrates differences in the meaning of the term among activist and ordinary gender ambiguous people. As part of my volunteer work at GSS, I managed the organization’s Facebook page, website and email account since Payal was illiterate and therefore unable to manage them on her own. It was my job to read out Facebook messages to her and to post her responses. In August, we received a Facebook message from an individual named Annie from Lahore. Annie’s middle-classness was apparent from her English-speaking skills and self-identification as “transgender.” Annie emphasized that she was not a khwaja sira and asked to be put in touch with a transgender person.

Payal suggested that I connect her with Rani, a Lahore-based khwaja sira activist. A few days later, after speaking with Rani, Annie sent another message stating that Rani was not transgender but a khwaja sira, and again requested to be put in touch with “a transgender” or a “shemale.” She clarified that transgender people were those who had a male body and the heart and soul of a woman. In response, Payal asked me to inform Annie that GSS did not differentiate between khwaja sira and transgender, and that our membership included people who self-identified as both. The following week, I created a Facebook event page to publicize GSS’s imminent protest against the delays in issuing ID cards to khwaja siras. When a foreign news correspondent posted a comment inquiring the meaning of khwaja sira, I relayed Payal’s response on the forum that khwaja sira meant transgender. Annie, who had also joined the event page, jumped into this online discussion by emphasizing her disagreement with Payal’s definition, and again, Payal emphasized that GSS did not exclude anyone from the umbrella category of khwaja sira.

Annie’s definition echoed the general public’s comprehension of a “khwaja sira” as an intersexual person. She disidentified with “khwaja sira” because she did not possess ambiguous genitalia. For her, transgender encapsulated her experience of gender dysphoria. Much like mainstream Pakistani society, she was not familiar with the broad indigenous and activist definition of khwaja sira wherein the feminine soul was prioritized over corporeality. Annie’s Facebook exchange with Payal highlights the prevailing confusion over the meaning of “khwaja sira.” This was partly a class-based issue. The way in which the term khwaja sira had been appropriated by many activist and ordinary zennanas and hijras did not resonate with gender ambiguous individuals from the upper and middle classes.

Importantly, Payal was vague in defining khwaja sira in her Facebook exchange with Annie. Little public awareness existed of how khwaja sira had been appropriated within activist circles. This was largely because activist leaders were intentionally ambiguous in their public representation of the term. While they had done a tremendous job of inserting the “khwaja sira” into the public consciousness, they were intentionally vague about their internal understanding of the term as an inclusive third gender identity category that prioritized felt femininity over somaticity. Activist leaders perpetuated doubt about who they were and what types of people constituted their ranks due to the fear of losing respect and the rights granted to them by the Pakistani state. Further, they used the term “khwaja sira” inconsistently, which blurred the already distorted representation of gender ambiguous people in the mainstream.

The following example describes how many ordinary people rejected the notion of the “feminine soul.” One day, Payal and I met an elderly man named Mir Sahab at a khwaja sira’s house. We learned that Mir Sahab, a retired army man, had recently poured his savings into setting up a vocational school for khwaja siras. Sympathetic to their plight, he wanted khwaja siras to have livelihood options other than working on the streets. However, Mir Sahab’s compassion was limited to those who were born with genital irregularities. Unfortunately, it was only after he had inaugurated the school that he discovered that most people who identified as khwaja sira were born male. Mir Sahab saw such individuals as “complete men” who were ineligible for charity. In contrast, he viewed intersexual khwaja siras as disabled and therefore rightly deserving of monetary assistance.

In the excerpt below, Mir Sahab describes his views on the concept of soul (rūh).

**Mir Sahib:** According to shariāh, there are three categories of khwaja siras. Those who are similar to men, that is, they have a male organ through which they can urinate, but nothing else beyond that. Then there are those who are similar to women, that is, they can

use their organ to urinate but nothing beyond that. The third category is *khunsā-e-mushkil*, which include those who are neither similar to men nor women.

**Faris:** What does Islam say about those who have a feminine soul, who are physically male but feel as though they are women from within?

**Mir Sahab:** See, what you are describing is desire (*khwaish*). These people claim that they are like women. But a person's personal desire cannot change their sex. Islam only sees these three categories. That's it! Nothing more than that. The sex of two men who engage in vice with one another will not change simply because they are doing bad work. If they are male, they will remain male. Now, if there is someone who says that it is his desire to wear women's clothes, shari'ah won't permit a person like that to change his sex simply because that is what he desires. He will remain the way Allah has created him.

**Faris:** So Islam does not recognize those who have a feminine soul?

**Mir Sahab:** What is this soul that you keep talking about? You cannot call that a soul. *Rūh* is something that makes our body functional, so when it leaves the body, all our body parts stop working...

**Faris:** To say that someone has a feminine soul is a way of describing how they feel from within.

**Mir Sahab:** But you cannot call it a soul. There is no soul. It's desire.

Mir Sahab's staunch religious beliefs prevented him from accepting the "feminine soul" as anything other than desire. In fact, he conflated feminine/gendered desires with homosexual acts. In privileging the external reproductive organs as determinants of sex/gender, he viewed individuals born with male genitals as men even if they desired or claimed to be feminine. In Mir Sahab's perspective, the concept of gender as a form of internalized identity independent of physical constitution did not exist. For him, sex was synonymous to gender, and any ambiguities beyond the body's natural givens were sinful desires.

Payal listened to Mir Sahab in silence before finally speaking up. She contested his narrow definition of *khwaja sira* by arguing that the feminine soul itself was a biological phenomenon rather than an ethereal or an unverifiable entity.

The fact that we have a soul is true, and we are also *khwaja siras*. Some men have women's hormones, and some women have men's hormones. A couple of years ago there was a case where a girl had gotten herself operated and became a boy and then she got married to a girl. When people found out, they raised their voice against them and took them to court. When the judge ruled that they would be imprisoned for five years, a women's organization asked me to intervene. Apparently, the judge had said that there are only two sexes, men and women. So the women's group announced that they were

going to file an appeal because the judge had incorrectly ruled that there are only two sexes. They said, “We are bringing a third sex person with us—Payal!” I told them that I am ready to get my medical checkup done, which will prove that I am neither a man nor woman. The tests will show that I have women’s hormones but I am not a woman, which means that I am of the third sex. So, then that case was dropped.

Payal responded to Mir Sahab’s views by suggesting that the feminine soul was a product of an excess of estrogen in the male body, which resulted in male effeminacy and generated feminine desires in gender ambiguous people. Payal’s explanation implies that the feminine soul could not be equated to mere wish or whim. As an innate desire, it had a strong biological basis that was beyond the control of the subject who possessed it. Whether or not Payal personally believed this explanation to be true is less important than the fact that it was among the framing strategies that she employed in interactions with antagonistic opponents.

### **Deceptive Representation**

The public transcripts that ordinary khwaja siras executed in the microcosm of everyday life, in their mohallahs with neighbors, out on the streets with strangers, or within the privacy of their homes with lovers/clients, were replicated in the macrocosm of activism. Though similar, these games of secrecy and deception had a wider scope in the realm of activism, where they were deployed to conceal knowledge, maintain ambiguity, and potentially push normative boundaries. The successful execution of these games demonstrated hijraness, the repertoire of qualities that zennanas and hijras were expected to hone if they wished to become activists. In order to achieve leadership status, a gender ambiguous person had to develop the competence, cunning, agility and resourcefulness required to survive a harsh and oppressive sociocultural environment. She was expected to execute these skills effectively through games that were meant to protect her and the communities she represented. Only senior activists who had mastered hijarpan were successfully able to play with the world.

Like most games, the strategic practices of gender ambiguous people involved two opposing parties: the deceivers (i.e., khwaja siras) and the deceived (i.e., ordinary people). The interactions between them reveal the “dialectic of disguise and surveillance that pervades relations between the weak and the strong...” (Scott 1990, 4). Lieberman analyzed deception from the perspective of both groups. From the viewpoint of the deceiver, Lieberman identified “three kinds of deception: a situation in which a person believes a proposition to be true and states the opposite of it [negation deception]; a situation in which a person believes a proposition and states a variation of it [variant deception]; and a situation in which a person believes a proposition but omits stating it [deception by omission]” (1977, 78). The examples that follow involve all three forms of deception.

To what extent did the public trust the fabrications presented by khwaja sira leaders? The recipients of deception interpret the act of duplicity in several different ways, which include closed awareness, suspicious awareness, mutual pretense and open awareness (1977, 68). The Pakistani public mostly had a closed or suspicious awareness that they were the subjects of deception at the hands of khwaja siras<sup>105</sup>. Suspicious awareness produced a state of obscurity about khwaja sira sex and sexuality among outsiders.

### Technologies of Deceptive Activism

Khwaja sira stratagems relied on fabrications, fables, fantasy, fictions and falsity that produced ambiguity about gender ambiguous people in the wider society. The larger public culture of skepticism (Khan 2013, 12-4) and conspiracy theories in Pakistan was mirrored in the ambiguity

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<sup>105</sup> A very small fraction of the wider society fell into the fourth category-- open awareness. These included individuals who either had intimate relationships with gender ambiguous people (e.g., lovers/clients, other sexual minorities) or those who worked closely with them (e.g., NGOs, long-term researchers).

perpetuated by such deceit. In the wake of Pakistan's booming media industry, this climate of conspiracies gained entertainment value among mass media consumers. For Pakistani news channels, "conspiracy theories and value judgments often [took]...precedence over fact-based reporting" (Yusuf 2011, 97). The speculative and indefinite nature of such reporting created an environment of uncertainty and a lack of trust for local politicians, foreign powers, religious sects and minority groups. Together the political environment, the internally fractured citizenry, and media culture proliferated skepticism in the mainstream. Khwaja sira advocacy can be located within this culture of skepticism, especially since it relied on the mass-media platform to sustain the public's uncertainty about gender ambiguous people.

In their attempts to maintain secrecy and confusion, khwaja sira activists deployed a number of game-like strategies, including prevarication or evasion, circular and ambiguous speech, the use of Farsi and metaphors, self-contradiction, blaming, etc. These techniques allowed them to maintain ambiguity towards khwaja siras in the mainstream. The following examples demonstrate how khwaja sira leaders tactfully managed to evade the truth.

In interacting with opponents, khwaja sira activists relied on hijraness in their struggle to control the meaning of "khwaja sira." Late one evening, I accompanied Payal and Shazia to ARY digital's studio in Karachi where they had been invited to participate in a television talk show. Payal and Shazia accompanied the news anchor onto the studio set, while I observed the live broadcast from behind the cameras. Activists, Noor Vicky and Banno Ali joined the transmission from Islamabad and Lahore, respectively. In the first excerpt below, the activists imply that khwaja siras were not men because they lacked the physical capacity to reproduce.

**Host:** Does your organization have any way of checking who is and who is not a khwaja sira before they are issued an ID card?

**Noor:** Only he who is a khwaja sira will say that he is a khwaja sira. No man will ever say that he is a khwaja sira.



**Host:** But I have heard that a lot of men pose as khwaja siras.

**Noor:** But if a man says that he is a khwaja sira to get a khwaja sira ID card, and then tomorrow he gets married and has children, then he will run into a lot of problems.

**Host:** But are you denying that these days some men do the getup of khwaja siras in order to earn money?

**Payal:** I'm very happy to hear you say that there are some men who do our getup and join our field. That means we must be doing something good if men are joining us.

Brother, if you have a problem with this, then you should put an end to unemployment in this country... Those who are married and have children will obviously not get a khwaja sira ID card made.

In the news anchor's view, those who possessed male sexual organs were fake khwaja siras. The activists deceive the host by suggesting that khwaja siras were not men, and that only the latter were able to bear offspring. Although they do not explicitly state that gender ambiguous people were unable to reproduce, this is implicit in their indirect responses.



**Figure 16.** Khwaja sira activists on the set of a television talk show.

Both Noor and Payal evade the talk show host's questions by prevaricating and providing vague responses. When the host inquires about ways of preventing ordinary men from registering for khwaja sira ID cards, the activists highlight the irrelevance of the posed question by suggesting that no man would voluntarily give up his privileged status as a man to register as a third sex/gender person. Payal then refocuses attention away from the physicality of khwaja siras by prevaricating on the larger structural problem of mass unemployment in the country, which

was evidently driving men to scrape a living by adopting the appearance of khwaja siras. The activists neither confirm nor contest the host's suspicion that "normal" men tend to join the "field." Instead, they maintain the myth of fake khwaja siras.

The above discussion was grounded in the hegemonic belief that khwaja siras were intersexual people, and that "normal" men joined khwaja sira communities. Although some heterosexual and homosexual men were known to adopt the appearance of gender ambiguous people (i.e., behrupīa) in order to earn through begging and sex work, such individuals were few in number and they did not join khwaja sira communities. However, according to dominant logic, the majority of the country's gender variant population would be "normal" men since they possessed functioning male genitals. The ideological understanding of khwaja sira and man was rooted in physical constitution rather than interiorized gender. Khwaja sira activists respond to this dominant view in their media campaigns by perpetuating doubt about the corporeal status of gender ambiguous people. They drew from their audiences' "repertoires of public culture and popular knowledge" (Benei 2008, 22) in order to maintain cultural resonance irrespective of its accuracy. It was precisely this ability to exploit relevant information about their sociocultural environments (Ganz 2000, 1005) that enabled activists to control the public representation of their communities.

In the next excerpt from show, Payal focuses on certain behaviors over corporeal features as indicators of a child's non-normativity.

**Payal:** We khwaja siras have certain habits and mannerisms that give away that we are khwaja siras. Also parents know from the beginning that their child is a khwaja sira especially if the child is not taking an interest in the work of men and is spending time in the kitchen or is more into makeup.

**Host:** But do such parents easily give away their kids?

**Payal:** In the past, they did but nowadays such kids come to us on their own. Among our lower classes, parents worry about what...neighbors will say if they find out that a khwaja sira has been born in their house. Due to the fear of ridicule, parents don't allow

such children to leave the house. But when they come to us, we...accept them, so they prefer to be around us.

Payal highlights involvement in women's roles as one of the earliest signs of a child's queerness. The host then questions whether or not parents give away khwaja sira infants, and in keeping with the myth, assumes that such children are born with ambiguous genitalia. Instead of debunking the fable, Payal briefly engages in a form of variant deception by presenting it as an outmoded practice. In stating that "a khwaja sira has been *born* in their house," Payal perpetuates the fable of intersexuality by misleading the audience into thinking that an infant can be identified as a khwaja sira at birth. Payal artfully reinforces the myth of genital ambiguity while emphasizing the true indicators of gender variance.

Circular speech is a specific genus among the khwaja sira games of deception. Below, all three activists confound the host by speaking in circles about the sexual desires of khwaja siras.

**Host:** So who are khwaja siras attracted to more? Men or women?  
(Noor laughs nervously)

**Payal:** See, we like whoever treats us nicely, whether they are men or women.

**Host:** But we were talking about the feelings of khwaja siras....

**Payal:** We feel for both men and women. It depends on how they treat us...If there is a man who likes us...and if he's a good friend of ours...then what's wrong with that?

**Noor:** Loving is not a crime.

**Host:** But does this love happen with men or with women?

**Noor:** Our love is for men, for women, for everyone.

**Host:** This is a very confusing situation. Ms. Banno, what are your thoughts?

**Banno:** Obviously, we...too have a heart...so we too like someone or another...whether it's your mother, your father or some friend.

The host carefully articulates his questions on a taboo subject by using non-sexual, euphemistic language. His inability to be verbally explicit on television enables the activists to deploy circular speech patterns to stifle his line of questioning. The above statements about khwaja sira object choice are safely couched in the idiom of "love" and "feelings," whose polyvalence allow the activists to digress about loving relationships between parents and children, siblings, and

friends. Despite being from different parts of Pakistan, these activist leaders were unified in their collective approach of publically representing khwaja siras as asexual beings who did not endanger the moral foundation of Pakistani society. They shouldered the responsibility of disguising the actual desires of khwaja siras and their romantic relationships with men. Nonetheless, the anchor's probing indicates his suspicious awareness that his guests were attempting to deceive him.

In the final extract, Payal provides a convoluted description of khwaja sira identities.

**Host:** Can you discreetly explain to me the difference between male khwaja sira, female khwaja sira and khunsa khwaja sira?

**Payal:** See, our relationship is with our soul. Often you hear that there was a girl but she used to...behave like a boy. And then later on when they did her medical test, they discovered that she was a boy from within. We have a similar condition. So a khwaja sira will select the box [for his ID card] that applies to him. But we have been given several options since we are neither complete men nor complete women.

Payal's intentionally obscure response about khwaja sira typologies was likely to be misinterpreted by many viewers to mean that gender ambiguous people were intersexual. In this instance of variant deception, she begins with an honest description of gender ambiguous people as individuals who possess a feminine soul, but then deliberately botches her explanation by suggesting that their condition could be medically validated. It remains unclear in her polysemous statement, "she was a boy from within," whether Payal was commenting on gender, genital or hormonal ambiguities. However, at no point does she explicitly state that khwaja siras are intersexual. Through her artful deception, she manages to maintain ambiguity about the corporeality and sexuality of gender variant individuals.

Importantly, Payal attempts to expand the contours of "khwaja sira" by emphasizing the feminine soul over somatic irregularities as its defining characteristic. In line with the Machiavellian approach to political transformation (Lieberman 1977, 66), she fuses a new idea

with a normative one in order to circumvent the threat of public critique and reactionary action. Payal introduces the notion of the feminine soul without disrupting the myth of intersexuality.

On our ride back from the studio, I questioned Payal about her roundabout manner of answering pointed questions. “Pakistan is an Islamic country, and we cannot talk about these things on television,” she said. “Yes, we have lovers, but that is something we do in hiding. There is no need for us to talk about it in public.” Activists believed that open discussions about sex and sexuality were inappropriate, and what khwaja siras did in the privacy of their homes did not concern the public. Payal believed that it was premature to overwhelm mainstream society with topics they were not prepared to process, especially ones that could be detrimental to khwaja siras and to GSS’s goal of positively framing them. At the conjectural moment of this study, khwaja sira activists did not feel safe in blatantly altering cultural meanings through the process of resignification.

In order to demonstrate their hijraness to other khwaja siras, activists frequently recounted incidents of personal triumph over and manipulation of opponents. One day after lunch at Najma’s house, Payal described how she outmaneuvered a religious cleric on the set of a television talk show right before the program went live on air.

The cleric was against khwaja siras. Before the show, he and I got into an argument. I told him that I don’t know much Islam...But I can read the *Kalmah*<sup>106</sup>. He said, “Well, what good will that do?”...I said, “Just tell me one thing: What does our religion teach us? Does it tell us to do all the things that *mullāḥs* do with young boys?” He said no. “Then why do all you mullāḥ have so many different parties? He is Sunni, he is Shia, he is from Jamaat-e-Islami, and so on. And you all tell us different ways of doing things. Do you want to make us mad?...Islam teaches us peace, brotherhood and love.” Then I told him that I will make live calls on the show to mullāḥ who I know personally who will admit on air that they are friends with khwaja siras, that they are in love with them.”

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<sup>106</sup> Kalmah here refers to the declaration of faith in Islam, in the oneness of Allah and in the belief that Prophet Muhammad is the last messenger of God. Those who wish to convert to Islam must first recite the Kalmah. This declaration of faith is enough for the purpose of conversion.

Then he said, “I’m getting a call, I have to go.” I said, “Go!” Right, so I blackmailed him. He refused to sit on the show.

Payal’s punch line brought bouts of laughter to the room. In addition to proving her worthiness as a leader, she conveyed precisely how she managed to overcome adversity. Payal diverted attention away from khwaja siras by simultaneously raising a number of issues that were meant to undermine the legitimacy of mullāḥs as credible figures of religious authority. She emphasized the fundamental tenets of Islam, such as love and peace, which she argued, were lost among Muslims due to the sectarian rifts incited by religious clerics. In her tirade, she threatened to highlight the hypocrisy of mullāḥs by exposing their involvement in illegitimate sexual acts.

Words were a khwaja sira’s most effective weapon against adversity. Activist leaders adopted the techniques that ordinary khwaja siras exercised in everyday efforts to combat discrimination. In reference to her media advocacy, Soni claimed to be an expert in responding to tough questions in a roundabout way (*bāt ūpar se ghomānā*). Importantly, this skill enabled her and other activists to answer questions related to corporeality without alienating or vilifying any khwaja sira identity groups. They were also able to turn delicate questions into opportunities to positively represent gender ambiguous people. Through diplomatic equivocation, they managed to reinforce positive ties with various stakeholder, including hijras, zennanas, and the general public.

The use of Farsi, the secret code of khwaja siras, was another technique of concealing knowledge from outsiders. During my initial months of fieldwork, the GSS team routinely employed Farsi in everyday speech to encrypt sensitive information because they were uncertain how I would react to it. One afternoon, I asked Payal to explain the meaning of the word “murat.” During her explanation, Payal was suddenly interrupted mid-sentence by Nadia who tried to relate murat, the Farsi word for gender variant youth, to murat, the Urdu word for idol.

**Nadia:** But guru, Hindus also have murats.

**Payal:** *Subhānallah*<sup>107</sup>. Her answers are unbelievable. (everyone laughs) It's because she is a dunyādār!

**Shazia:** (in Farsi) Be quiet, Mother! Defamation! (*Kare, Ma! Kacī!*)

**Payal:** Whenever she talks, she talks like a child.

Irritated by her comment, Payal ridiculed Nadia by calling her a dunyādār, a word used to describe those who had children and belonged to the wider society. This statement was meant to suggest that Nadia's emphasis on the Urdu rather than the Farsi meaning of murat indicated her status as a non-khwaja sira outsider, a notion that was further supported by the fact that she was married with children. Put differently, Payal mocked Nadia due to her inability to relay insider knowledge and cultural meanings in an intelligible manner.

Startled by her sudden "outing" of Nadia, Shazia reminded Payal not to disclose potentially damaging information in my presence. At the time, I neither understood much Farsi nor was I familiar with the unique appropriation of the word dunyādār by khwaja siras. I did not comprehend the hidden meanings within the altercation and disregarded it as frivolous. Months later, while revisiting this recorded conversation, I realized what I had missed. By employing their clandestine code, the GSS team had succeeded in concealing the fact that Nadia was married with children.

Khwaja sira games of secrecy and deception were instrumental in aiding community activists to momentarily win arguments, resolve disputes, respond to critique, escape tricky situations, and artfully represent khwaja siras in mainstream society. However, these public transcripts failed to address structural inequality, to facilitate social acceptance of gender and sexual diversity, and to demystify the confusion surrounding gender ambiguous people.

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<sup>107</sup> Arabic for God is Glorious.

Consequently, the same topics continually resurfaced in exchanges between khwaja siras and the general public.

### Diversity Among Activists

Although indigenous leaders demonstrated an overarching uniformity in public advocacy, a closer analysis of their encounters with outsiders reveals subtle differences or “dissonances” (Menon 2010) in their approach to deceptive gaming. These differences enhancing the understanding of the games activists played with opponents. Compared to others, Payal was more amenable to addressing thorny issues related to khwaja siras in a tactful manner. She employed game-like strategies in answering difficult questions instead of misrepresenting zennanas/akvās as male imposters or blatantly denying the involvement of khwaja siras in sex work. For instance, instead of repudiating the existence of khwaja sira prostitutes, Payal attributed their involvement in sex work to their exclusion from mainstream occupations. In contrast, Noor Vicky publically denounced those who possessed male genitals as impersonators, who she also blamed for engaging in sex work and ruining the reputation of authentic khwaja siras. Noor explicitly asserted in several television appearances that real khwaja siras were incapable of reproduction.

At the opposite extreme from Noor was Farah who openly supported sex work and sought to expose the myth of intersexuality. Farah was among the few activists who wanted to settle the confusion related to the somatic composition of khwaja siras. Both Payal and Noor were firmly against Farah’s honest public advocacy. They believed it was tactless and that it jeopardized the safety of khwaja siras. However, unlike Noor, both Farah and Payal refused to publically declare khwaja siras as intersexuals. While Farah was explicit in her representation of



gender variant individuals as gender dysphoric, Payal depicted them using deliberately elusive speech that neither affirmed nor denied that they were intersexuals. Hence, Payal represented a happy medium between the polarized views of indigenous leaders like Noor and English-speaking middle-class activists like Farah. Nonetheless, the differences in opinion among these leaders resulted in an internal crisis of representation within the khwaja sira movement.

Younger middle-class activists were beginning to take carefully measured steps towards fostering social change by shattering stereotypes about gender ambiguous people in mainstream discourse. In the following example, Farah's guru, Zara, and her guru-bhāī, Mehreen, both members of MC, demonstrate that not all khwaja siras were opposed to baring the truth. The excerpt below is from an ARY digital television talk show, *Ba Khabar Sawera* (2012). The participants, who in addition to the members of MC included the show's host and a doctor, discuss sex-reassignment surgery, a topic that was rarely if ever broached in the public sphere.

**Mehreen:** Dr. Imrana...I have had surgeries, and I believe that they should be legalized so that we can stop this thing (i.e., homosexuality)...I have also taken steps to stop it...after surgeries we no longer have any sex appeal...

**Doctor:** ...Feelings play a crucial role in sin...How will this world operate if we start doing whatever we please...Should there be no concept of will power?

**Zara:** Isn't it better to move away from bad deeds by getting surgeries instead of continuing to engage in them? Also, do you consider Iran a Muslim country?

**Doctor:** Absolutely!

**Zara:** Then how come it is legal there for a man who does not consider himself a man and wants to live life as a woman to have surgeries and live life as a woman?

**Doctor:** ...It could be that after studying this matter they have allowed those who have a biological defect to have surgeries.

**Zara:** Let me clarify...if a man in Iran wears women's clothes, the government gives them money for a sex-change....How is it that another Muslim country has allowed such operations but we can't accept them?

**Doctor:** Betā, that is only for situations where a doctor sees that a child is a male but his organs are that of a female.

Zara and Mehreen suggest that sex-reassignment should be permitted because it eradicates sexual sensation<sup>108</sup> and reduces propensity for illegitimate sexual contact (i.e., anal sex). In making their argument, however, they vilify homosexuality. Dave describes this process as one through which activists aim to realize each new possibility at the expense of others potentialities (2011, 3).

When Zara broaches the topic of SRS in Iran, the doctor refuses to believe that such surgeries could be permitted for anything other than genital irregularities. The doctor's views were privileged over the facts presented by the activists, even though the topics covered were beyond her area of medical expertise. Despite their best efforts, Zara and Mehreen failed to stimulate a constructive dialogue given their perceived lack of subject matter expertise. Nonetheless, their efforts illustrate the gradual but risky maneuvers that were being initiated by an emerging generation of middle-class activists, who, instead of deceiving audiences through game-like techniques, aimed at facilitating an open dialogue about issues affecting gender ambiguous people.

### **Exploiting Cultural Ambiguity**

In her youth, Payal played khwaja siras and ordinary people as an act of survival. As an adult, Payal, the seasoned leader, utilized her hijraness on a bigger scale and in far more sophisticated ways within the activist sphere. The following example demonstrates how she intended to manipulate dominant beliefs and the lack of concrete public awareness about khwaja siras for personal gain. Payal was visibly agitated after a meeting at MHS where she and Kareem had argued over her potential employment at one of the organization's CBOs.

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<sup>108</sup> They suggest that SRS eliminates the desire for sex since it involves the removal of the penis and testicles and the reconstruction of a vagina that is unresponsive to sexual stimulation. In reality, however, the removal of external male genitalia is known to enhance the libido of transsexual women instead of desexing them.

Kareem said to me, “Payal you have an organization...and according to the rules, a person working in one organization cannot be employed by MHS.” He said that I would have to leave GSS, and I said that I'll leave it...Then he says that he needs educated people like Shani and Shazia. So he'll take all these educated people, and tell me to leave? But I'm a hijra!...I will play such a “game” of hijras that you won't see a single khwaja sira in their office. I'll send a letter to the Home Department and the Chief Minister's House, and then I'll have their office raided. These people say they work for khwaja siras, but then I'll ask them, “This is an office for hijras. Which one of them is a hijra?”...Shani and Shazia are...zennanas...I'll tell him, I'm a hijra but you didn't give me work. You have kept all of them here by making them pose as khwaja siras. That means you're a fraud”...When we are khwaja siras and we won't benefit, especially a khwaja sira who worked so hard...[then] I will...take morsels out of your mouth and say that this is our morsel, put it here. We will eat this!

Payal's remarks illustrate the role of ambiguity and misrepresentation in activist contexts. Payal was aggravated because MHS's stringent requirements made her ineligible for employment. Moreover, she risked losing some of GSS's most qualified members to MHS.

Payal proudly attributes her dexterity in scheming to her hijraness, which is evident in her choice of words: “...I am a hijra! I will play such a *game* of hijras...” Her use of the English word *game* denotes her mindfulness of the game-like properties of her scheme. As retribution, Payal planned on exploiting the myth of intersexuality by framing the organization for engaging in fraudulent activity by hiring male imposters instead of authentic khwaja siras like herself. As a hijra/nirbān, she could misrepresent her mutilated genitals as God-given, an option that zennanas/akvās did not have. Such a game of deception relied on cultural misconceptions and ambiguities surrounding khwaja siras. Though mostly used as a survival strategy, khwaja siras sometimes abused their infinitesimal powers for personal gain.

## Conclusion

Activist leaders fashioned virtual khwaja sira identities through transnormative framing techniques and the games of deceptive representation. The media advocacy of activist

organizations was crucial in the deployment of these identities. The virtual khwaja sira shaped through activism was nonnormative yet normalized, indigent and helpless, detached from sexual pursuits and immorality, shaped through biological forces and divine intervention, and was a respectable and responsible Muslim and Pakistani citizen. In addition, activists represented themselves as modern and accomplished subjects. These detached identities were meant to conceal the corporeality and sexualized lifestyles of khwaja siras, and to foster their inclusion into mainstream society. Rather than raising awareness of who khwaja siras really were, this identity politics renewed the obscurity surrounding gender ambiguous people. This chapter has also demonstrated that the games that ordinary khwaja siras played in everyday life, particularly their skilled maneuvers to control and manage information, were replicated in the domain of activism.

## **Chapter 9:**

### **Conclusion: Trodden Paths, New Directions**

The identity politics of khwaja sira activists both undermined and facilitated the khwaja sira movement in Pakistan. They assisted gender ambiguous people in short-term interactions with the public, allowed them to settle disputes, win arguments, deflect negative attention, and represent khwaja siras as respectable citizens. Their deceptive games helped to enhance their security and ensured their survival in an oppressive social environment. However, khwaja sira politics were provisional solutions that perpetuated ambiguity, and left the public in a state of indeterminacy about who khwaja siras really were. At best, this kind of politics temporarily grazed the surface of the problems faced by gender variant Pakistanis without resulting in long-term stigma reduction. Even as they served transient functions, they failed to address cultural sources of oppression. Having demonstrated the merits of khwaja sira politics in earlier chapters, I conclude this dissertation by considering the failures of the contemporary approach to khwaja sira activism. I also speculate and suggest future directions that gender ambiguous people and their allies might consider in dealing with inequality and oppression.

#### **The Pitfalls of Ambiguity, Secrecy and Deception**

Development programs founded on insufficient or erroneous knowledge of relevant subject matter have a high propensity of failure. A serious drawback of activist deception was that it played a part in obstructing the state's plan to "mainstream" khwaja siras. This goal was impeded at its most elemental level, that is, in registering khwaja siras for national identity cards. The failure of this plan rested partly on the unwillingness of many gender ambiguous people to be legally identified as khwaja siras.

There were several reasons for low enrollment for new identity cards. First, hijras/nirbāns feared that registering with the government would enable law enforcement to monitor and trace them if ever a crackdown were ordered on physically emasculated people. Second, a legal khwaja sira identity was problematic since most gender ambiguous people had dual identities that were split between their biological and khwaja sira kin. In the case of zennanas/akvās, it would eliminate the option to marry women since legally and religiously marriage was permitted only between men and women. For those who were already married, a khwaja sira ID card would become a source of shame at the time of their children's school admission, for which proof of parentage was required<sup>109</sup>. Third, many gender ambiguous people were reluctant to relinquish their male ID cards, which they were required to do in order to obtain a new identity. NADRA transferred key information (e.g., father's name and family number) from the old to the new card. This meant that applicants' khwaja sira identities would become legally attached to their biological families, thereby collapsing the separation they wished to maintain between both spheres of their life.

When I returned to Pakistan in 2013, my sources informed me that only 50 khwaja siras had registered in Karachi, another 50 in other parts of the Sindh province, and a mere 250 in Lahore. This was a far cry from the estimated 80,000 khwaja siras in the country. Most of those who had enrolled were either hijras/nirbāns or zennnas/akvās who had no intentions of marrying. Aside from the state's failure to make culturally informed policies about khwaja siras and the resistance of gender ambiguous people to state surveillance, this ID card fiasco was an outcome

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<sup>109</sup> Moti explained that when gender ambiguous people “try to get their kids admitted into a school, and if their ID cards show that they are khwaja siras, then the first thing the child will be asked is, ‘Your father is a hijra? How were you even born if he is a hijra.’”

of khwaja sira ambiguity, secrecy and deception, which aimed to conceal the corporeal and marital status of gender ambiguous people from the general public.

The misrepresentation of khwaja siras as impoverished people also led to the failure of state-sponsored programs to uplift gender ambiguous people. In November 2011, the Health Department of the Government of Sindh organized an “eye camp” in collaboration with GSS. When Shazia and I arrived at the camp late in the afternoon, the optometrist on site made no effort to hide his disappointment at the lack of participation in the camp. His goal was to provide treatment to around 150-200 khwaja sira attendees, but barely ten had showed up all day. Payal knew that khwaja siras earned enough to cover the cost of basic medical treatment, but during the planning of the event, she deliberately withheld this information from the doctor who was under the impression that gender ambiguous people could not afford proper health care. Payal did not attempt to correct this presumption because she wanted to maintain an image of khwaja siras as indigent people.

Although hijraness was essential in enabling khwaja siras to fight adversity in everyday and activist contexts, it all too often stifled their growth within institutionalized domains. Nadeem, the manager of AKS, for instance, was overwhelmed by the unruly behavior of his khwaja sira employees, most of whom had little or no education and prior office experience.

[T]hey tend to argue a lot and they think that what they are saying is right. Sometimes they argue not because they think that what they are saying is right, but because society has never given them anything. I think it is due to the way society treats them on a regular basis.

The aggressive and argumentative demeanor of khwaja siras was a product of stigma and exclusion. The use of the tongue as a weapon against oppression was crucial to the survival of khwaja siras in their daily experiences of marginalization. However, this very defense functioned against them in the workplace where it was perceived as professional misconduct.

Khwaja sira identity politics factored into the failure of development programs aimed at gender ambiguous people. Their deceptive practices prevented the government and the NGO sector from implementing effective rehabilitation programs for khwaja siras. The critics of such politics tended to disregard the subjective experiences of gender variant people, which, I contend, must be assessed in light of their daily experiences of stigma, structural inequality, and insecurity. Activist leaders sought justice the only way they knew how, that is, by employing conventional strategies of hijraness. However, these techniques were mere bandaid solutions, limited and short-term in their impact.

### **Rights, Activism and Change**

Legal transformations in their favor created a discourse around khwaja sira rights and gave some the courage to challenge oppression and discrimination. Khwaja sira activists found a voice in the public sphere that allowed them to garner media attention and to protest against incidents of brutality. However, legal victories did not amount to marked improvements in social attitudes towards khwaja siras or to positive changes in their everyday lives. Moreover, it remains to be seen if the activism of gender ambiguous people will shift towards a more open and fruitful exchange with stakeholders. Is there room in Pakistani society for productive dialogue about gender/sexual diversity that does not privilege genital makeup? Will khwaja siras be able to publically pose as anything other than intersexuals? Or will their prevailing cultural practices persist as a result of their continuing subjugation?

### Empowerment: Education, Self-Esteem and Knowledge

Culture change will rely partially on the government clarifying its stance on khwaja siras and



publically recognizing them as individuals who possess a feminine soul<sup>110</sup>. In the absence of an explanation by the state, khwaja siras will continue to live in fear and uncertainty about their legal status, remain vulnerable to oppression, and will fear seeking justice in response to the violence that it meted out on them. Knowing that the state gives them the right to self-determination regardless of corporeality will assure gender ambiguous people of their protection under the law, give them the confidence to benefit unreservedly from the judicially conferred rights, and propel their movement in productive directions. However, the state's silence surrounding nonnormatively gendered bodies is likely to persist until Pakistan decides its own identity as either a secular or an Islamic state. Hence, the most significant effort will have to come from khwaja sira activists and their allies who will benefit from focusing on three goals: the provision of education, self-esteem building, and the dissemination of knowledge.

Lack of education was among the factors preventing gender ambiguous people from fighting social stigma. In the absence of necessary skills and qualifications, they were unable to secure donor funding to sustain their organizations, and access information that could empower their activism. The few who were employed in the NGO sector had to take up junior clerical, outreach and janitorial positions due to inadequate credentials and experience. NGOs working on issues related to khwaja siras had done little in terms of providing training on issues of import. However, in 2013, the Literacy and Non-Formal Basic Education (LNFBE) department of the Punjab Government introduced a six-month training program for khwaja siras in Lahore and Rawalpindi. LNBFE's adult literacy curriculum included basic Urdu, English and mathematics

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<sup>110</sup> I would advise against such a move had Aslam Khaki not informed me personally that the legal understanding of khwaja sira was inclusive of various non-normatively gendered and sexed individuals. Nevertheless, Khaki's testimony, though crucial, maybe not representative of other state interlocutors who might interpret "khwaja sira" differently. Importantly, regime changes could also turn the government's tide of approval for gender ambiguous people.

along with a beauty course<sup>111</sup>. Among NGOs, MHS initiated a “transgender” literacy project in June 2013. The program aimed to teach English, Urdu, basic arithmetic and topics on sexual health by incorporating khwaja sira Farsi into its curriculum.

Although these initiatives are noteworthy, education programs for gender ambiguous people may benefit from taking the following into consideration. First, the provision of education for khwaja siras must be accompanied by social acceptance. Projects focused on educating and empowering gender ambiguous people are unlikely to meet their objectives if khwaja sira beneficiaries are unable to obtain and maintain employment due to social intolerance and workplace harassment. Second, these projects are likely to be most successful among the younger generation of khwaja siras. Those who are fully acculturated into the khwaja sira social structure, and already enjoy high earnings through sex work will have the lowest motivation to better their lives. In contrast, murats are likely to be more receptive to learning, and eager to participate in the emerging fashion, entertainment, media and other industries. Third, khwaja sira role models and success stories will play a crucial role in enabling gender ambiguous people to imagine themselves in alternative careers and in encouraging them to pursue unconventional paths. Khwaja sira literacy projects must be geared towards sustaining inspiration and enthusiasm among beneficiaries. Fourth, innovative pedagogies will have to be developed to manage the attention deficit of gender variant students since khwaja siras were known to get easily distracted due to their lack of experience working in professional and formal environments.

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<sup>111</sup> LNBFE remunerated students as an incentive to attend classes. Project leaders believed that in the absence of these stipends, gender ambiguous people would be inclined to skip lessons and to use class time to earn through begging and sex work. LNBFE’s initiative suffered due to low student attendance despite the provision of a stipend. Evidently, the department’s small compensation was not enough to keep students motivated to attend class on a regular basis.

Projects aimed at empowering gender ambiguous people will also benefit from building their self-esteem. Egocentric behavior, which served to veil their insecurities and low self-worth, was a source of conflict within khwaja sira social and activist networks. In their “behavior change” initiatives, development programs will benefit from focusing greater attention on raising the self-esteem of khwaja siras. This is essential in efforts to inspire them to bring about positive change both in their personal lives and within their communities<sup>112</sup>.

Finally, khwaja sira activists were encumbered in their efforts to address social stigma largely due to lack of relevant information. Their inability to harness the power of knowledge for activism put them at an immense disadvantage<sup>113</sup>. Development initiatives can empower khwaja siras by disseminating relevant information that can help them overcome their psychological constraints and insecurities, respond to critique in a constructive manner, spread valuable knowledge instead of merely perpetuating mythical discourse, and facilitate fruitful dialogue with religious and legal authorities in order to influence public policies related to gender ambiguous people. Knowledge is therefore indispensable in the production of reverse discourse and in the acquisition and maintenance of power. Hence, along with public awareness raising, khwaja sira social development and activism must focus on the provision of vital information, educational training and self-esteem-building among constituents.

### Sexual Rights, Islam and Legal Developments

Social stigma prevented activist leaders from addressing the sexual rights of khwaja siras.

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<sup>112</sup> Community activists and NGOs will also have to make a dedicated effort to ‘sensitize’ the general public about khwaja siras. For instance, educating the youth about gender ambiguous people will positively impact the future generation’s perception and treatment of khwaja siras, which in turn, will improve the self-esteem and quality of life of gender variant youth.

<sup>113</sup> For instance, most khwaja siras were unaware that sex-reassignment surgeries were not illegal in Pakistan and that they were sanctioned by an Islamic injunction in Iran.

Activists distanced gender ambiguous people from sex and sexuality and represented them as asexual ascetics. However, through future collaborations with legal and religious experts, such as Aslam Khaki, activists may be able to facilitate dialogue on this thorny issue. As a SC advocate, an Islamic jurist of the Federal Shariat Court, and a jurist consultant (*fiqh-e-mushir*), Khaki had the power of issuing fatvās that were accepted as law both in the SC and the Federal Shariat Court. During my meeting with him, Khaki described his views on khwaja sira sexuality and highlighted possible future directions for their sexual rights.

**Khaki:** I think their sexual rights should be addressed because there is so much confusion. Since they have a psychological tendency, there might be some who want to live as husband and wife. [So]...we also have to think about their sexual satisfaction. For this, surgery might be allowed, which it already is since there is no law against it. They may opt for sex change and get married. A jurist like myself is in a position to do scientific research on this matter.

**Faris:** So you're saying that we do not have all the answers on this issue?

**Khaki:** Yes, because this matter has not been properly debated. Anything that is sex-based, has not been debated completely.

**Faris:** A lot of people believe that changing the form in which God has created you is against Islam.

**Khaki:** Islam does not say this...This is simply a misunderstanding of some ideas.

In contradiction to popular belief, Khaki highlights that sex-reassignment surgeries and other forms of bodily modifications were not illegal by virtue of the absence of secular laws against them. However, such procedures were deemed un-Islamic by religious authorities and were widely believed to be against Islam. Khaki points out the lack of adequate dialogue and well-researched religious jurisprudence on sensitive topics, such as sex and sexuality, and emphasizes the potential of *ijtihad*<sup>114</sup> on issues, such as sex-reassignment. Khaki had an intellectual outlook on shariáh as a set of evolving laws that should develop in keeping with new research and

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<sup>114</sup> In Islamic law, *ijtihad* refers to decision-making through personal effort. It is a process that requires a thorough knowledge of theology, revealed texts, legal theory and an exceptional capacity for legal reasoning through which scholars are expected to find solutions to problems.

contemporary social problems. Through jurists like Khaki, policies related to the sexual rights of khwaja siras have a chance of developing.

However, in order to avoid further stigmatizing sexual minorities, the implementation of policies related to SRS must serve not as an antidote to sodomy but as an option for those who voluntarily wish to change their sex. The religious endorsement of SRS should specifically address the dissonance between the gender identity and assigned birth-sex of those who experience gender dysphoria or possess a rūh. Hence, discussions about SRS should not be based on sexual rights, which risks initiating a dialogue about the illegitimacy of anal sex, but on recognizing the right to corporeal transformation by privileging internalized gender over external genital makeup. These advancements will assist the state to clarify its stance on gender ambiguous Muslims while legitimating the mismatch between sex and gender.

### **Final Note**

Although their games of deception provided a degree of acceptance, safety and empowerment to khwaja siras, they must be accompanied by gradual, long-term approaches if gender ambiguous people expect greater inclusion and acceptance in mainstream society. Activists must develop culturally informed approaches that address the origins of stigma if they wish to bring about meaningful change to the lives of khwaja siras. This will involve conducting research, accessing relevant religious and legal information, engaging in constructive dialogue with stakeholders, etc. This approach may not have an immediate impact and may even pose security risks, but they have the potential of generating meaningful change in the long run.

## Glossary

<i>‘Ām log</i>	Ordinary people
<i>‘Abāaiya</i>	A full body cloak worn by women in parts of the Muslim world.
<i>Āche khāse mard</i>	Normal men, reproductively capable men
<i>‘Ashūrhā</i>	The 10 <sup>th</sup> of the Islamic month of Muharram, in which Shia Muslims mourn the martyrdom of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of Prophet Muhammad.
<i>‘Aorat</i>	Woman, female
<i>Bādshāh</i>	King
<i>Bahu</i>	Daughter-in-law
<i>Bāñḥā</i>	A homosexual man
<i>Barī maṛī</i>	A big, historic residence where hijra lineage chiefs reside.
<i>Bāt ūpar se Ghomānā</i>	To twist logic from above, to respond in a roundabout manner
<i>Bāt cīt</i>	Chit-chat
<i>Behrupā</i>	One who impersonates
<i>Betā</i>	Child or son
<i>Betī</i>	Daughter
<i>Bhāī</i>	Bother
<i>Bhatījā</i>	Paternal nephew
<i>Bhatījī</i>	Paternal niece
<i>Bigārah</i>	Ruin
<i>Buḍhā bābā</i>	Old man
<i>Burāī</i>	Vice, sin

<i>Caccā</i>	Paternal uncle
<i>Cālīsva</i>	The fortieth day and last day of mourning after a person's death.
<i>Chāhvā</i>	Adolescent boys who have sex with men for small sums of money.
<i>Dādā</i>	Paternal grandfather
<i>Dādī</i>	Paternal grandmother
<i>Dāīrah</i>	Circle
<i>Ḍāṇḍā</i>	Sticks used in folk dances
<i>Desī</i>	Native
<i>Dost</i>	Friend
<i>Dūlhan</i>	Bride
<i>Dunyā</i>	World
<i>Eīd</i>	The name of the two Muslim religious festivals.
<i>Faqīr</i>	Ascetics
<i>Fatvā</i>	An Islamic injunction
<i>Filmī</i>	Relating to films, film-like
<i>Gāndū</i>	A man who enjoys being anally penetrated
<i>Guftagū</i>	Conversation
<i>Hadīth</i>	Sayings and teachings ascribed to Prophet Mohammad.
<i>Hājī</i>	A form of address for someone who has performed hajj, the Muslim holy pilgrimage to Ka'ba in Makkah, Saudi Arabia.
<i>Hajj</i>	The pilgrimage to Makkah that every Muslim is required to make at least one in his/her lifetime.
<i>Hamjins</i>	Homosexual

<i>Izzat</i>	Respect
<i>Kalmah</i>	Refers to the declaration of faith in Islam, in the oneness of Allah and in the belief that Prophet Muhammad is the last messenger of God.
<i>Khadṛā</i>	A man who is impotent or sterile.
<i>Khel</i>	Game, play
<i>Khelnā</i>	To play
<i>Khunthā / khunsā mushkil</i>	A person who is born with indeterminable genitalia.
<i>Khusrah</i>	The Punjabi term for hijra
<i>Kurti</i>	A short waist length shirt.
<i>Lākh</i>	One hundred thousand rupees
<i>Lashkar</i>	Army
<i>Lorī</i>	A lullaby for infants
<i>Mālīshīah</i>	Masseur
<i>Mān</i>	Mother
<i>Marāsī</i>	An indigenous singer or musician
<i>Mard</i>	Man, male
<i>Māshaāllah</i>	An Arabic term meaning “willed by God,” used to express appreciation for a person or an occurrence.
<i>Maut kā kunvāṇ/ Golā</i>	The well/globe of death. This is a wooden trellised well/globe in which stuntmen ride cars and motorcycles and khwaja siras dance at the bottom of the structure.
<i>Mehndī</i>	A pre-wedding ceremony or a wedding procession in which guests carry decorative henna trays.
<i>Mohallah</i>	Neighborhood



<i>Mun kālā karnā</i>	To lower one's respect, to blacken one's face
<i>Mukhannath</i>	Effeminate men or sometimes transvestite men
<i>Mullāḥ</i>	A man educated in Islamic theology and law.
<i>Murīd</i>	Student or disciple
<i>Nām</i>	Name
<i>Nānī</i>	Maternal grandmother
<i>Navāsī</i>	Maternal granddaughter
<i>Niāz</i>	A religious offering involving the distribution of food.
<i>Nikā'</i>	Islamic marriage or the legal contract between a bride and a groom as part of an Islamic marriage.
<i>Niqāb</i>	A headscarf that covers the entire face except the eyes.
<i>Pāk ho jānā</i>	To become purified
<i>Pardesī</i>	Non-native, foreigner
<i>Pīr</i>	Master or teacher
<i>Potā</i>	Paternal grandson
<i>Potī</i>	Paternal grand daughter
<i>Paidāishī</i>	By birth
<i>Korān Khwāni</i>	A religious gathering in which people recite parts of the Quran.
<i>Ramzān</i>	The holy month of fasting for Muslims
<i>Rishte</i>	Relationships
<i>Rūh</i>	Soul, spirit
<i>Sās</i>	Mother-in-law
<i>Salām</i>	A form of greeting among Muslims. Salām means peace in Arabic.

<i>Shalvār qamīz</i>	A traditional South Asian dress consisting of loose, pleated trousers and a long-shirt or tunic. Women's salwar kameez differ from men's in terms of color, print and style.
<i>Shariāh</i>	Islamic law
<i>Shehzādī</i>	Princess
<i>Shīshā</i>	Hookah
<i>Subhānallah</i>	Arabic for God is Glorious.
<i>Sunnah</i>	Sunnah is the way of life prescribed as normative for Muslims on the basis of the teachings and practices of Prophet Muhammad and the interpretations of the Quran.
<i>Takallufī</i>	A man who pretends to be effeminate for ulterior motives.
<i>Ummah</i>	In Arabic, Ummah means nation or community, and it refers to the network of Muslims the world over.
<i>‘Umrah</i>	Muslim pilgrimage to Makkah
<i>‘Urs</i>	The annual death anniversary festivals of Sufi saints.
<i>Vālā</i>	That, person
<i>Vazīr</i>	Minister or political advisor
<i>Zaāt</i>	Ethnicity
<i>Zakāt</i>	The Islamic practice of charitable giving based on accumulated wealth.
<i>Zānkhā</i>	A homosexual man

### Farsi Terms

<i>Aḍībāz</i>	Pickpocket, extortionist
<i>Akvā</i>	A khwaja sira who has not undergone physical emasculation.
<i>Bakhṛā</i>	A share of money earned by conferring blessings.

<i>Barāpān</i>	Seniority or seniority allowance
<i>Bīlā</i>	A cruel or ugly man
<i>Cāmkā</i>	Admirer
<i>Capṭy</i>	The flattened area with a urinary passage resulting from emasculation surgery.
<i>Caṭātī</i>	A meeting in which important community matters are discussed and conflicts are resolved.
<i>Celā</i>	Student, disciple
<i>Codhry</i>	A leader of a zennana circle
<i>Dād-guru</i>	The kinship term used by a khwaja sira for her guru's mentor.
<i>Dāgh dhulvāna</i>	To get a stain washed
<i>Ḍanḍ</i>	Fine
<i>Ḍeṛā</i>	A khwaja sira's residence
<i>Dharonā</i>	A man who enjoys being anally penetrated
<i>Ḍhīngnā</i>	To beg
<i>Dunyādār</i>	A person belonging to mainstream society; biological relatives; someone who has children.
<i>Fīrqā</i>	Women's attire
<i>Gīryā</i>	Lover, partner, man
<i>Gīrye kā joṛā jalsah</i>	The ritual celebration of a lover/partner
<i>Gīrye valī murat</i>	A partnered khwaja sira
<i>Guptī</i>	A man who hides his desire to be sexually penetrated out of shame.
<i>Guru</i>	Mentor, teacher, senior

<i>Guru-bhāī</i>	The kinship term used by a khwaja sira's disciples for one another.
<i>Hijarpan</i>	Hijraness; the body of hijra knowledge and practices.
<i>Hukka-pāni band karnā</i>	To impose a ban on or to put one's student on probation
<i>Jhalaknā</i>	To become nervous or confused
<i>Kacī</i>	Defamation, embarrassment
<i>Kaṛe karājā</i>	Shut up, be quiet
<i>Khatam roṭī</i>	The last mourning event for a deceased family member.
<i>Khel</i>	A khwaja sira social system or ethnic group.
<i>Khoṭkī</i>	Men's attire
<i>Khundak</i>	Jealousy
<i>M'ashūq</i>	A young and beautiful khwaja sira, particularly one who demonstrates self-confidence and an air of superiority.
<i>Mīṭhe cāval</i>	Adolescent and young men with whom khwaja siras had sex for pleasure. In Urdu, mīṭhe cāval refers to a rice dessert.
<i>Moṛā</i>	Cash contributions made by khwaja sira guests on joyful occasions.
<i>Nehāro</i>	Woman
<i>Nirbān</i>	A khwaja sira who has undergone physical emasculation involving the removal of the penis and testicles.
<i>Pakī kā giryā</i>	Permanent lover/partner
<i>Pesha</i>	The ritual transfer of a student; the fee for the transfer of a disciple from one guru to another.
<i>Potrā celā</i>	The kinship term used by a khwaja sira for her disciple's student.
<i>Pun</i>	Client or sex work
<i>Pun valī murat</i>	A khwaja sira sex worker

<i>Roṭī</i>	An event organized to mourn the death of a khwaja sira.
<i>Seepo</i>	Vagina
<i>Tamāshbenī</i>	To create a spectacle by showering performers with cash.
<i>Ṭolī</i>	Begging and blessing
<i>Us kī gandī ho jānā</i>	To be stained or sullied
<i>Vadhāī</i>	Blessing
<i>Velā</i>	The thirty-fifth day of mourning, organized by the mother of the deceased khwaja sira.
<i>Vīrat</i>	Earning areas designed to specific hijra families.

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## **PUBLICATIONS**

### **Refereed Journal Articles**

2011    “Powerful Cultural Productions: Identity Politics in Diasporic Same-Sex South Asian Weddings.” *Sexualities* 14(4): 377-398.

### **Book Chapters**

2014    “Khwaja Sira: Transgender Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan,” in *South Asia in the World: An Introduction*, edited by Susan S. Wadley, 170-184. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe.

### **Manuscripts in Preparation**

2014    “‘This lipstick is the work of the devil!’: Being ‘Transgender’ and Muslim in Pakistan” for *American Ethnologist*.

### **Other Publications**

2012    “Staying Safe in Karachi.” *South Asia Center Outreach Bulletin*, Spring.

2009    “Preliminary Research Towards Mapping Calcutta’s Queer Movement.” *South Asia Center Outreach Bulletin*, Spring.

2009    “Cultural Amnesia and the Discourse on Purity.” *Swikriti Patrika*, Kolkata.

2007 *Amazones, Women Master Drummers of Guinea*. Brandeis University Intercultural Residency Series.

## GRANTS, FELLOWSHIPS AND HONORS

2013	Maxwell Dean's Summer Fellowship, Syracuse University, for dissertation write-up. (\$3,800)
2013	Claudia De Lys Scholar in Cultural Anthropology, Syracuse University, for dissertation write-up. (\$2,200)
2012-13	American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS) Short Term Research and Lecturing Fellowship for dissertation research in Pakistan. (\$18,500)
2011-2012	Claudia De Lys Fieldwork Grant for dissertation research in Pakistan. (\$11,000)
2010-11	Fulbright-Hays, Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad for dissertation research in India (relinquished due to visa issues). (\$43,650)
2010-11	Fulbright IIE award for dissertation research in India (declined).
2010	Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship for summer Bengali language training (declined).
2009-10	Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (Bengali).
2009	Gordon Bowles Essay Prize, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University to "Powerful Cultural Productions: Identity Politics in Diasporic Same-Sex South Asian Weddings" for outstanding graduate student paper.
2009	Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship for summer Bengali language training (declined).
2008-2009	Bharati Research Grant, South Asia Center, Syracuse University for preliminary dissertation research in India. (\$1,750)
2008-2009	Foreign Language and Area Studies Fellowship (Bengali).
2006-2007	Graduate Scholarship, Brandeis University.
2005	Student Paper Prize, Central States Anthropological Society to "Homosexuality in a Global Age: The Origins and Dynamics of the Neoteric Pakistani 'Gay Culture'" for best undergraduate student paper.
2004	Richter Grant, Hanover College, for research on homosexuality and emerging gay



cultures in Pakistan. (\$2,500)

## **INVITED LECTURES**

- 2013 “Representing Transgender Citizens: The Role of Duplicity in Khwaja Sira Identity Politics and Activism in Pakistan,” Fatima Jinnah Women University, Rawalpindi, Pakistan.
- 2013 “Creating Respect: The Gendered Experiences of Khwaja Siras in Karachi Mohallas,” Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan.
- 2013 “Toils of the Field: An Anthropological Approach to the Study Transgender Activism in Pakistan,” Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan.
- 2013 “Khwaja Sira: Transgender Activism and Transnationality in Pakistan,” Lahore University of Management Sciences, Lahore, Pakistan.

## **CONFERENCE PAPERS**

### **Panels Organized**

- 2013 Transing Occlusion: ‘Trans’ Lives in Asian and African Geographies, American Anthropological Association annual meeting, November 20-24.

### **Papers Presented**

- 2014 “Khwaja Sira: Gendered Bodies, Rights and Taxonomic Regulation,” Re-envisioning Pakistan: The Political Economy of Social Transformation, an international conference at Sarah Lawrence College, April 4-5. (Invited session)
- 2013 “Khwaja Sira: Identity Terminology, Representation and Transgender Activism in Pakistan,” American Anthropological Association annual meeting, November 20-24. (Panel selected)
- 2013 “Khwaja Sira Domesticity: Gendered Embodiment, Sexual Labor and Desire Among Transgender Pakistanis,” the Annual Conference on South Asia, October 17-20. (Panel selected)
- 2012 “Representing Transgender Citizens: the Role of Deception in Khwaja Sira Identity Politics and Activism in Pakistan,” the Annual Conference on South Asia, October 18-21.
- 2012 “Always the Bridegroom, Never the Bride: Familial Obligations and Yearnings of Khwaja Siras in Pakistan,” the Association for Asian Studies annual conference, March 15-18. (Panel selected)

- 2005 “Homosexuality in a Global Age: The Origins and Dynamics of the Neoteric Pakistani Gay Culture,” Central States Anthropological Society annual meeting, March 17-20. (Panel selected)

## **CAMPUS LECTURES**

- 2013 “‘This lipstick is the work of the devil!’: Being Transgender and Muslim in Pakistan,” Department of Religion, Syracuse University.
- 2013 “Transgender Muslims in Contemporary Pakistan,” Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University.
- 2012 “Pressure and Desire: The Weddings of Transgender Pakistanis,” Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University.
- 2012 “Transgender Activism in Pakistan,” Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University.
- 2012 “Local, National and Transnational Influences in Transgender Activism in Pakistan,” LGBT Studies Program and LGBT Resource Center, Syracuse University.
- 2009 “Same-Sex South Asian American Weddings,” Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University.
- 2009 “Powerful Cultural Productions: Identity Politics in Diasporic Same-Sex South Asian Weddings,” Spring Speaker Series, South Asia Center, Syracuse University.

## **ACADEMIC WORK EXPERIENCE**

- 2012-2013 Research Assistant, Susan Wadley, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University
- 2007-2008 Research Coordinator, Intercultural Residency Series (ICRS), Brandeis University.
- 2004-2005 Research Assistant, Chanasai Tiengtrakul, Anthropology Department, Hanover College.
- 2001-2002 Research Assistant, Daniel Murphy, History Department, Hanover College.

## **ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH**

- 2012-2013 Lahore, Pakistan. Three-month dissertation fieldwork on a transgender community based organization.

- 2011 Karachi, Pakistan. Twelve-month dissertation fieldwork on transgender sexual politics, culture, and activism.
- 2009 Syracuse, NY. Five-month collaborative ethnographic research with Planned Parenthood on sex education for parents.
- 2008 Kolkata, India. One-month ethnographic research on LGBT community organizing.
- 2007 Boston, MA. Seven-month ethnographic research on same-sex South Asian American weddings.
- 2007 Boston, MA. Five-month ethnographic research on women master drummers of Guinea.
- 2006 Boston, MA. Four-month qualitative research on heteronormative and queer diasporic narratives.
- 2004 Hanover, IN. Four-month ethnographic research on queer spirituality and activism.
- 2004 Karachi, Pakistan. Four-month ethnographic research on emerging 'gay' identities and practices.

## **SERVICE**

- 2013 Chair, session on "Transing Occlusion: 'Trans' Lives in Asian and African Geographies," American Anthropological Association annual meeting, November 20-24
- 2012 Consultant, Khwaja Sira Society (Pakistan)
- 2011-2013 Consultant, Gender Interactive Alliance (Pakistan)
- 2011-2012 Editorial Board member, Journal of Diverse Sexualities
- 2010-2012 Co-produced "Promise Land" (Kevin Dalvi, Director), a feature film on immigration, same-sex sexuality and South Asian diaspora. The film was nominated for Smithsonian exhibit, *Bollywood and Beyond: Indian Americans Shape the Nation*.
- 2009-2010 Brown Bottle Coordinator, Anthropology Graduate Student Organization, Department of Anthropology, Syracuse University

2009            Consultant and research coordinator, Real Life Real Talk, Planned Parenthood, Syracuse, NY

## **MEDIA COVERAGE**

2013    “Promise Land” by Vanessa Rodriguez. *The Word*.

2009    “Transgendered in a Muslim Land” by Greg Duggan. *Maxwell Perspective*, Spring.

## **LANGUAGES**

Urdu     – Fluent in speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing

Hindi    – Fluent in speaking and listening comprehension

Bengali – Intermediate level knowledge of speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing

## **PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

American Anthropological Association (AAA)

The Association for Queer Anthropology (AQA)

American Institute of Pakistan Studies (AIPS)

Human Sexuality and Anthropology (HSAIG)